

The World's Longest Running Magazine Of Sci-Fi - Horror - Fantasy

STARBURST



2014 PREVIEW
ISSUE



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EDITORIAL


Welcome to **Starburst** Issue 395.

This is our extra special preview of 2014, and what a year it is shaping up to be. The return of both old and new **X-Men**, **Spider-Man**, **Sherlock**, and a new era of **Doctor Who**. Not to mention the latest from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and tons of other genre Movies and TV series. It looks like you will be literally spoilt for choice - so we thought we'd lend a hand. Let Starburst be your guide to the coming year...

We also catch up with Michael Rooker and George A. Romero, and bring you all your regular goodies. As promised last month, **It's Only A Movie** is back, and you can find out why it was absent last Issue.

There will also be an announcement very soon about the return of the **Starburst Radio Show**. It will be part of the launch lineup for **Fab Radio International** in late November. Primetime Wednesdays at 9pm. Keep reading our website, and you will be the first to know when to tune in. Till next month,

Keep watching the weird and wonderful...


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THINGS TO COME

a round-up of the best (and worst) of this month's genre news

For all the latest news updates go to www.starburstmagazine.com



AVATAR

Still recovering from the fact that there's THREE more **Avatar** movies in your future, kicking off Christmas 2016? Us too. Of course, depending on your opinion of James Cameron's highly profitable but ultimately divisive 2009 film, you're either swooning at the prospect, counting down the days until Pandora's back on the big-screen, or currently eyeing a rock to go live under until 2018 and all this is over. We apologise up front if you're a member of the latter; this news isn't going to win you over. In fact, it's probably going to irritate you to the point that it might cause injury, so let's just avoid a lawsuit and advise you to select another story. (Go read the one about those kids remaking **Raiders of the Lost Ark**; that's nice.) They gone? Good. Okay, so the big piece of Pandora propaganda this month comes with the official announcement that Steven Lang will reprise his role as chief baddie, Colonel Quaritch, in all three movies. Cameron himself promised the character's arc will be "unexpected", which is an understatement considering he was bloody well dead the last time we saw him. There was whispers some time ago that both Michelle Rodriguez and Sigourney Weaver had had "talks" to also come back for sequels, so we fully expect their characters to return from the grave alongside Quaritch too. How this will be explained satisfactorily is a whole other story. Maybe Unobtainium did it. Yeah, we'll go with that. The **Avatar** saga commences filming October 2014 for a continuous, back-to-back shoot.

INTRUDERS

Along with writing partner James Wong, Glen Morgan played a pivotal role in the success of **The X-Files** back in the day, penning many of the series' most acclaimed episodes (he introduced the world to Eugene Tooms in the unforgettable **Squeeze**, for example). He also brought us the under-appreciated **Millennium**, created the **Final Destination** series and remade **Black Christmas** (but let's not touch that one). Now he's set to return with an 8-part sci-fi/horror series newly greenlit by BBC America entitled **Intruders**, which is based on the 2007 novel by award-winning novelist Michael Marshall. The book weaves a genre-spanning tale of a former LAPD cop searching for his missing wife, an abducted ten-year old girl who isn't quite what she seems and a whole lot more weirdness we can't spoil here. Production begins in Spring 2014 for a release later that year. Giving you ample time to check out the book and see what all the fuss is about.

THE STUFF OF LEGEND

After penning (deep breath) **Feast**, **Feast II: Sloppy Seconds**, **Feast III: The Happy Finish**, **Saw IV**, **V**, **VI** and **VII**, **The Collector**, **The Collection**, and **Piranha 3DD** (exhale), Patrick Melton and Marcus Dunstan are set to take a well earned break from horror by scripting **The Stuff of Legend** for Disney. The fantasy film tells the epic tale of a young boy kidnapped by the Boogeyman and taken to the netherworld that lies beyond the doors of his closet. But not to worry, an army of his loyal toys led by a brave teddy bear, Max, will venture into 'the Dark' to do battle with the forces of evil and rescue him. Nice to see Melton & Dunstan haven't abandoned the creepy completely. **The Stuff of Legend** is based on Mike Raicht, Brian Smith and Charles Paul Wilson III's ongoing 2009 graphic novel series by the same name. It's certainly an intriguing concept with huge potential (who doesn't want to see a **Toy Story** / **Labyrinth** mash-up?) but it's early days yet; even if development goes smoothly we shouldn't expect to see the film before 2016.

SNEAK PEEK...



After months of tweeting pictures of his back, Dwayne Johnson has finally given us a proper look at the title character in Brett Ratner's **Hercules: The Thracian Wars**. Gotta give props to that badass novelty hat!

STAR WARS

At last! An official **Episode VII** update! Oh how long we've waited! What's that, Lucasfilm? The screenwriter we were all pretty excited about is no longer writing the film? Bugger! Yes, the only solid piece of news from the galaxy far, far way this month wasn't what we expected, nor what we wanted to hear. Michael Arndt is now off the project, replaced by director J.J. Abrams and Lawrence Kasdan. The latter we're happy with, naturally; this is the guy who wrote **The Empire Strikes Back** and **Raiders of the Lost Ark** after all, but the direction Abrams decided to take **Star Trek Into Darkness** makes some of us very nervous indeed. If J.J. messes this up Starburst will be forced to go Order 66 on his arse. Lucasfilm's press release didn't touch on why the creative switch had taken place, but let's face it, you don't make such a decision if everything's going great. We look forward to hearing Arndt's side of the story on this...

In further **Star Wars** news, reports emerged that in addition to the new trilogy, standalone features, **Rebels** and various theme park attractions, Disney are also planning a series of TV specials centering on our favourite Sith Lord, Darth Vader. There's no further details available at the time of going to print (including whether these take the form of live-action or animation) but TTC must confess to being a tad nervous about this move too. You might find our lack of faith disturbing, but let's all remember the last "TV Special" set in the **Star Wars** universe was the **Holiday Special**. And we hear that didn't go down so well.

HELLRAISER

A remake of the much-loved 1987 horror flick has been long talked about, but rights owners Dimension seemed content on just churning out increasingly shitty straight-to-DVD sequels instead. Until now. This month brought the news that the franchise will finally be resurrected proper, with the Lament Configuration right back in the hands of creator

Clive Barker himself. Even more encouragingly, Barker has stressed that Doug Bradley must return as Pinhead, and he wants to put the emphasis back on practical effects rather than CGI. Oh, what sights he shall show us...

MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE

Fans of the property have been waiting an Eternia for Hollywood to get around to having another stab at bringing He-Man and his buddies to life, and though things were recently looking quite promising, development has taken a slight step back this month with the news that director Jon Chu has chucked in the towel. The script (once called **Grayskull**) is also getting an overhaul, with Columbia bringing in Terry Rossio to take a crack at it. Rossio's best known for penning the dreadful **Pirates of the Caribbean** series and, most recently, mega dud **The Lone Ranger**. No wonder Cringer's a nervous wreck!

RAIDERS!

While we wait for Indy to return to our multiplexes (ball's in your court George and Steve, Fordy's well up for it), the next time we see the adventuring archeologist onscreen will likely be in a new film from **Napoleon Dynamite** producer Jeremy Coon. Entitled **Raiders!**, the movie will chronicle the true tale of two movie-obsessed kids who set out to remake **Raiders of the Lost Ark** shot-for-shot on their parent's camcorder. It took Chris Strompolos & Eric Zala seven long years to complete the film, finally wrapping in 1989 when they were 18. (The continuity errors on this thing would probably send Robert Webb into anaphylactic shock.) Their commitment was rewarded when Eli Roth, after discovering it while at film school, gave a copy to friend Harry Knowles in 2002. His Aint it Cool News website helped spread the word, resulting in **Raiders of the Lost Ark: The Adaptation** playing to

POSTER MORTEM



Here's the latest one-sheet for STD-themed horror flick, **Contracted**. We're getting itchy just looking at it.

sold out crowds at the Austin based Alamo Drafthouse. Spielberg even sent the guys a letter of congrats! (Though it sounds like Lucas either couldn't be arsed to watch, or didn't approve of the flagrant disregard of IP.) To learn more about these crazy kids and their adventures (they nearly died, many, many times), check out Alan Eisenstock's book **Raiders!** from which this film takes its inspiration.

SELLING TIME

Will Smith is reported to be attached to a new supernatural time travel thriller by Dan McDermott, writer of 2008's **Eagle Eye**. **Selling Time** tells the **Twilight Zone**-esque tale of a man swapping seven years from his life expectancy for a

chance to go back and relive his shittiest day. Presumably he thinks that he can make some changes that will affect his entire future, rather than him being an absolute sadist. The star was circling this very same project several years ago, so we're confident that there's much more to this story than its goofy concept might suggest.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in Big Willy world, it turns out that Roland Emmerich hasn't given up on the star agreeing to appear in **Independence Day 2** after all, by revealing there's two versions of the script in existence - one featuring the character of Steve Hiller, and one without him. As the sequel is due to hit cinemas July 2015, we'll found out soon whether Smith is willing to lower his fee to put in an appearance.

ARMY OF DARKNESS 2

Regular readers will recall there was lots of talk about a fourth movie in the original **Evil Dead** canon around the time of the remake's release, but the more cynical amongst you probably chalked it up to Raimi and co generating publicity for their new flick. The radio silence since had started to make us think we'd been played yet again, until Bruce Campbell told a Con audience this month that *yes*, **Army of Darkness 2** is indeed currently in development. A short time after, asked by a fan on Twitter whether he'd be directing said sequel, **Evil Dead** (2013) director Fede Alvarez confirmed that job will again belong to Sam Raimi. Nothing's official yet, but the return of Ash is starting to look like a very real possibility...

BABYLON FIELDS

With the continued success of zombies on our screens (**The Walking Dead**'s fourth season debuted to a record-breaking 16m viewers), NBC are taking another look at their aborted 2007 series **Babylon Fields**. Though it beat both **The Returned** and **In the Flesh** to the punch, **Fields** may have its work cut out for it convincing newcomers that its tale of dead folk trying to return to their past lives isn't just a carbon copy. It's an even riskier move when you consider that, as detailed in these very pages last month, A&E are in the process of developing their own US version of **The Returned**, and ABC will soon launch **Resurrection** (formerly called **The Returned**; confused yet?) which is *also* about the recently deceased returning to their former lives! **Babylon Fields 2.0** will ditch the original pilot and start from scratch, but it will retain its creators Michael & Gerald Cuesta and Michael Atkinson.

POSTER MORTEM



Hang on, so this *isn't* an animated remake of Adam Green's 2010 horror flick?! Gutted.

AND FINALLY...

Harrison Ford confirmed talks are ongoing with Ridley Scott about reprising Deckard for the director's proposed **Blade Runner** sequel. Still not budging on the issue of **Star Wars** though.

+++

Kristen Stewart and Nicholas Hoult have been tipped to star in **Equals**, a "sci-fi love story". But before you write it off completely, the screenplay's by Nathan Parker, who penned Duncan Jones' excellent directorial debut **Moon**.

+++

And speaking of Jones, **Vikings** star Travis Fimmel has emerged as the frontrunner to take the lead role in the filmmaker's eagerly awaited third movie, 2015's MMO adaptation, **Warcraft**.

+++

Proof that Hollywood isn't always as daft as you might think, Relativity Media has cancelled plans to adapt rubbish eighties toy **Stretch Armstrong**.

+++

The upcoming BBC adaptation of Susanna Clarke's popular novel, **Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell** has cast its stars, with Bertie Carvel and Eddie Marsan playing the respective leads.

+++

Guillermo del Toro has confirmed that writing on **Pacific Rim 2** has begun, even though the greenlight has yet to shine. Kaiju fans, keep 'em crossed...

+++

Director Paul Feig will produce for **Peanuts**. But before you start hitting the filmmaker up to help you out with your latest short, we're actually talking about Blue Sky Studio's 2015 movie adaptation of Charles Schulz's classic comic strip, not his rate of pay.

+++

Fresh from the success of **Gravity**, writer Jonás Cuarón will next turn his attention to the legend of Atlantis in Warner Bros' **The Lost City**.

+++

Will Tim Burton return to direct his good buddy Michael Keaton in **Beetlejuice 2**? Reports suggest the filmmaker is attempting to re-juggle his schedule to accommodate both the sequel (which is currently being penned by Seth Grahame-Smith) and his adaptation of **Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children**.

+++

Though J.J. Abrams said it was unlikely we'd see **Star Trek** on the small screen anytime soon, his **Into Darkness** writer Robert Orci seems much more confident, confirming that talks with CBS have indeed been held recently. Could we see the franchise return to TV in 2016, just in time for its 50th anniversary?

+++

...Orci has also been talking about his upcoming reboot of **Van Helsing**, suggesting that Universal could be thinking about a Marvel-style 'Cinematic Universe' for its Monsters to inhabit.

+++

After taking one look at the dismal box office receipts for **The Mortal Instruments: City of Bones**, makers Constantin Films immediately pumped the brakes on production of the sequel, disappointing fans of Cassandra Clare's series who understandably assumed they'd now never get to see **City of Ashes**. Well, cheer up guys, because the studio have announced that it will go forward with part two after all, with shooting to resume in 2014! The rest of us can just go back to avoiding anything desperately chasing the **Twilight** dollar.

+++

Ben Kingsley has let-slip that he's returning to the Marvel Cinematic Universe in a secret project. Has the "toast of Croydon" gone and scored himself his own Marvel One-Shot?

+++

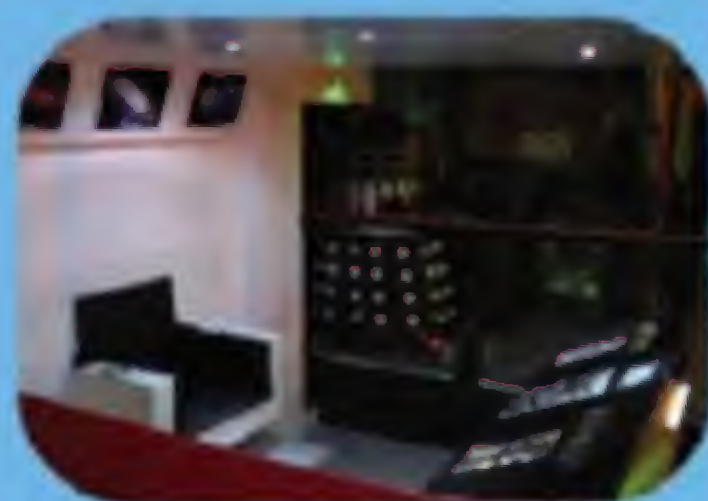
And bringing this month's news round-up to a screeching halt... **Cars 3**. Yup, looks like Pixar are going to inflict another of the damn things on us. And yet we still await a sequel to **The Incredibles**. Criminal.

TTC 395 written by Kris Heys (kris.heids@starburstmagazine.com)



CULT TELEVISION and MOVIE THEME BARS

*ent 1050





2014 Movie / TV PREVIEW

STARBURST

With the year fast coming to an end, it's time for us to cast our eyes to the abundance of genre treats heading to screens big and small over the next twelve months...

Words:

Andrew Marshall, Andrew Pollard, Kieron Moore, Pete Turner, Jack Bottomley, Ed Fortune, Iain Robertson, Jon Towlson, Paul Mount, Stuart Mulrain, Adam Starkey, Neil McNally, Callum Shephard, Christian Jones, Michael Noble, Robin Pierce, Robert Keeling, Hayden Mears and Kris Heys.



SHERLOCK SERIES 3



By the time Sherlock series three comes around, fans will have spent a whole two years asking "how did he survive *that*?" With the wait finally over, Benedict Cumberbatch's Sherlock will be back with three new episodes, returning to a newly-moustached Watson (Martin Freeman) in The Empty Hearse, Mark Gatiss' adaptation of Conan Doyle story The Empty House. This will be followed by Stephen Thompson's The Sign of Three (based on Doyle's novel The Sign of Four), in which we can expect to see Watson's wedding, presumably to the new character played by Amanda Abbington (Freeman's real-life partner). The series will end with His Last Vow by Steven Moffat, bringing the sleuthing duo into a confrontation with new villain Charles Augustus Magnusson (Lars Mikkelsen). This episode is named after His Last Bow, Conan Doyle's final Holmes story, but it won't be Sherlock's last - series four is already confirmed. | KM



Spike Jonze's tale of a lonely writer (Joaquin Phoenix) falling in love with his new operating system (Scarlett Johansson) has already begun generating major award buzz, months before its release. Her is being pegged as a 'sci-fi romance' and if we're brutally honest with ourselves, who wouldn't fall in love with some artificial intelligence voiced by Johansson? Apple, pull your finger out. | AS

TARZAN



In this CGI retelling of the Ape Man's story, Tarzan goes up against a group of mercenaries working for the man that took over his parents' company after their death in an airplane accident. Twilight's Kellan Lutz and Resident Evil: Afterlife's Spencer Locke provide the performance-capture. Cheetah's turning over in his grave already. | AP

I, FRANKENSTEIN



Lionsgate will be hoping that their adaptation of I, Frankenstein will add up to more than the sum of its body parts. Based upon the Darkstorm Studios graphic novel created by Kevin Greivoux, I, Frankenstein is set in a dystopic present. Victor Frankenstein's creation, Adam (Aaron Eckhart), is the prize in a war between gargoyles and demons, with both sides hell bent on discovering the secret of his immortality. Written and directed by Underworld co-writer Stuart Beattie, I, Frankenstein's cast includes the ever watchable Bill Nighy, Yvonne Strahovski, Miranda Otto, and Aden Young as Victor Frankenstein. With a PG-13 rating in the US and 3D conversion, Lionsgate are clearly aiming for the widest possible audience. But despite a strong cast and striking visuals will this horror-lite fare have difficulty scaring up an audience beyond teenage males? In box office takings I, Frankenstein may end up more dead than... "ALIVE!" | CJ

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY: THE MARKED ONES

Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones sees the directing debut of PA2, 3 and 4's scriptwriter, Christopher Landon (son of Michael). Confirmed by Oren Peli back in April 2012 as a "cousin" rather than a spin-off from the series, Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones (previously known as The Oxnard Tapes) features "Catholic themes" and brings a Latino slant to the franchise. The mainly Latino cast includes Richard Cabral, Carlos Pratts, Eddie J. Fernandez and Jorge Diaz. Landon writes as well as directs, and PA stalwarts Peli and Greg Plotkin are back as producers (with Plotkin also serving once again as editor). Blumhouse are keeping their cards close to their chest as far as storyline goes, but confirm that although the film is in English it is firmly geared towards the Spanish market. Hmm... As you can see from these images, certain events seen in Paranormal Activity 4 are picked up in this one. | JT



THE TOMORROW PEOPLE

Created in 1973 as ITV's rival to BBC1's Doctor Who, The Tomorrow People was a cheap and cheerful success story which ran for six years, later being revived for three glossier series in the 1990s. Now they're back, homo-superior - teenagers possessed of extraordinary powers such as telepathy, telekinesis and teleportation - rising again in a slick new series for The CW Network. Developed by Greg Berlanti, Julie Plec and Phil Klemmer, long-time fans of the original, the new series centres on Stephen Jameson (Robbie Amell) whose developing powers bring him into conflict with others of his own kind - the Tomorrow People - and Ultra, the sinister organisation headed by Dr Jedekiah Price (Mark Pellegrino) which is determined to wipe out this new breed of humans. Hopes are high for the new generation of Tomorrow People; the tin-foil spacesuits and plastic rayguns of the 1970s series are out but some of the original's trappings - the gang's secret underground base and biotronic computer - are back. Storylines are likely to be emotionally driven and action packed, a more grounded and believable incarnation of the next stage in human evolution. The Tomorrow People looks to be an ideal fit for The CW's preferred drama model of bright, shiny teens in thrilling action/adventure stories and is expected to be one of the break-out hits of the new season. | PM





ROBOCOP

Never has a single remake met with such scepticism as this take on Paul Verhoeven's satirical classic. Announced back in 2005, fans have been increasingly worried ever since, especially when they saw the crime-fighting cyborg's sleek new look. Only recently was faith in the project restored, with September's trailer debut managing to impress. Though set in 2029, José Padilha's take on the story seems to be very much a product of the 2010s, casting its eye over very contemporary issues such as the war on terror and the power of multinational corporations. Plus, Samuel L. Jackson has a remarkably silly haircut. With relatively unknown Joel Kinnaman (AMC's *The Killing*) in the title role, Padilha has assembled a high-calibre supporting cast, including Jackson as media mogul Pat Novak, plus Gary Oldman as the scientist behind RoboCop and Michael Keaton as the OmniCorp CEO. RoboCop's former partner Anne Lewis has changed gender to Jack Lewis (we're not sure why) and is played by *The Wire*'s Michael Kenneth Williams, while the ED-209 will show up, though this time in CGI rather than charmingly daft stop-motion. Director Padilha, though new to Hollywood, has solid experience making intelligent and dynamic thrillers - check out his Brazil-set *Elite Squad* films if you haven't already. | KM



POMPEII



Directed by Paul W.S. Anderson (wait, come back!) Pompeii is set to be a disaster movie of Titanic proportions. Featuring impossibly six-packed Kit Harington (Game of Thrones' Jon Snow) as a slave caught between erupting rock Mount Vesuvius and a hard place called Pompeii, it looks to mix romance with explosive action. Could be the new Titanic or it could be (shudder) the new Pearl Harbor. | PT

ALMANAC

ALMANAC

Little has yet to be revealed about the plot of this sci-fi themed found footage film, but we do know it concerns a group of youngsters discovering plans for the construction of a time machine. Produced by Michael Bay under his Platinum Dunes label (good to see them moving away from remakes), Almanac marks the feature debut of director Dean Israelite and soon-to-be Paranormal Activity 5 writers Jason Pagan & Andrew Stark. | JB

Disney's fifth animated film detailing the adventures of J.M. Barrie's Tinker Bell before she met a certain boy who never grew up. This time Tink and her fairy friends get struck by a pirate's curse and swap talents, which is probably every bit as thrilling as it sounds. That said, we can't fail to be impressed by the voice talent, which includes Lucy Liu, Mad Men's Christina Hendricks and Loki himself, Tom Hiddleston. | IR

THE PIRATE FAIRY



VAMPIRE ACADEMY

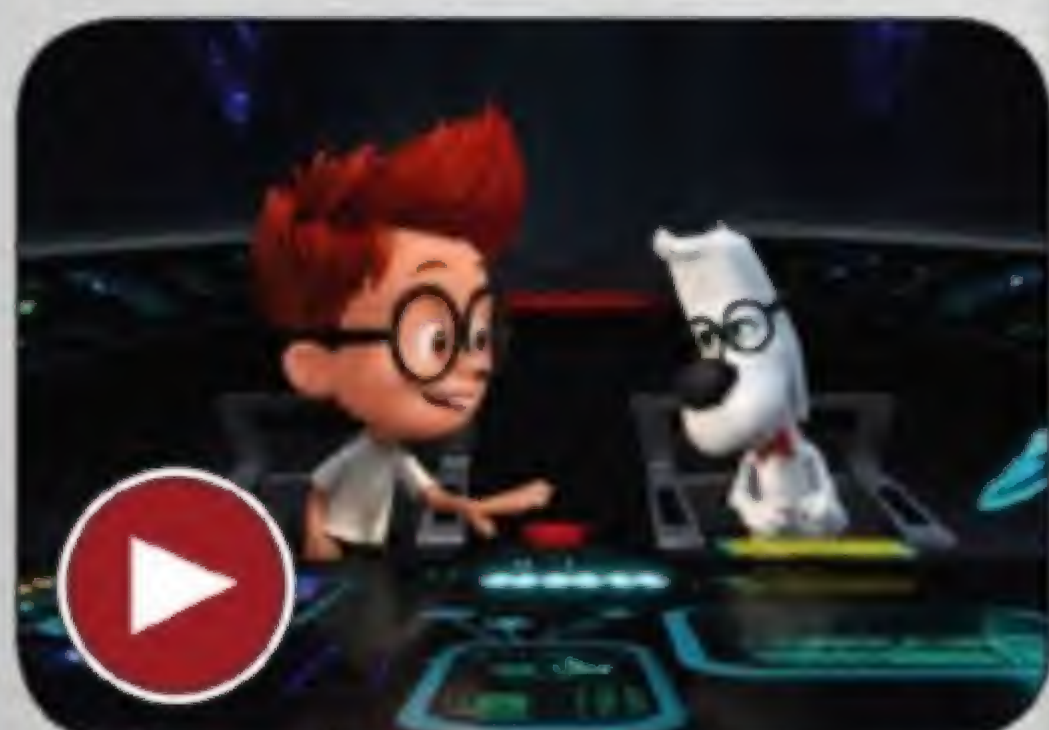
Sadly, this isn't some strange new reality TV show, instead, Vampire Academy is the latest attempt to repeat the success of other teen movies by turning yet another paranormal romance novel series into a feature film. It's the story of a half-vampire girl training to be a bodyguard for a fully-fledged undead creature who falls for her teacher. Despite being hyped as Harry Potter meets Twilight, it has the potential to be greater than the sum of its parts. | EF



SEVENTH SON

Ben Barnes apparently didn't get enough of starring in fantasy adaptations with 'Chronicles' in the title after appearing in two Narnia films as Prince Caspian. Now he appears in Seventh Son alongside Jeff Bridges and Julianne Moore, a movie loosely based on the first book in Joseph Delaney's The Wardstone Chronicles series. Jeff Bridges is a 'Spook' named John Gregory and the only man that can stand in the way of Moore's Mother Malkin, a witch intent on bringing all sorts of darkness into the world. Ben Barnes is the apprentice who must be trained in the ways of magic in order to wield a range of special effects, become a Spook and save the world. The question is: will this herald the start of a huge new franchise or falter at the first hurdle? With 13 books at their disposal, Legendary Pictures are certainly hoping for the former! | PT



MR PEABODY
& SHERMAN

Animator Jay Ward's creations return in this upcoming CGI film from Dreamworks. Join the brilliant talking dog Mr. Peabody (Ty Burrell) as he cracks the laws of time travel with his legendary "WABAC Machine." Along for this wild ride along the space-time continuum is his bespectacled adopted boy Sherman (Max Charles). Rejoice Rocky and Bullwinkle fans, as this is the first in a potential film series featuring the irreverent denizens of Frostbite Falls! | NM

DEVIL'S DUE



From the filmmaking collective known as Radio Silence (who directed the "10/31/98" segment in V/H/S) this horror movie looks at an early pregnancy. Not sinister enough for you? Well as Zach (Zach Gilford) and Samantha (Allison Miller) McCall document the pregnancy, Zach notices changes in his wife that may hint at an evil within. How about now? It may be optimistic to expect a handheld Rosemary's Baby but there is a lot that could be done with this prenatal horror picture, and we'll all find out if Radio Silence can deliver when Devil's Due arrives in cinemas... on Valentine's Day. | JB

THE LEGO MOVIE



Zack Snyder may have Batman and Superman, but this film has Batman, Superman, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and Morgan Freeman... all made of LEGO! Phil Lord and Chris Miller (Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs) are the directors behind this animation, a combination of stop motion and CGI. If you've played the LEGO video games, imagine the cut-scenes turned into a movie, with just about every LEGO brand ever and an amazing voice cast, all ramped up to eleven. Parks and Recreation's Chris Pratt stars as Emmet, an ordinary minifigure who's mistaken for the Master Builder - who is prophesised to save the universe - and must defeat evil tyrant Lord Business (Will Ferrell). Also starring Cobie Smoulders, Liam Neeson, and Will Arnett, this could be the movie ten year-old you could only dream of - and if it leaves you wanting more, there'll be a whole load of tie-in LEGO sets. | KM

MUPPETS

MOST WANTED



It's time to put on... a sequel? That's right! The Muppets are back, and this time they're doing it in style. Picking up from the last film, the gang takes 'The Muppet Show' on a world tour! Exotic locales abound, as the Muppets are unwillingly drawn into a crime caper headed by the villainous Constantine and his sidekick Dominic. To make matters even worse, Constantine is the spilling image of Kermit. James Bobin returns to direct another strong comedic cast, this time headed by Ricky Gervais, Tina Fey, Ty Burrell, and a host of celebrity cameos. Get ready because this Spring is about to become a whole lot "Muppetational!" | NM



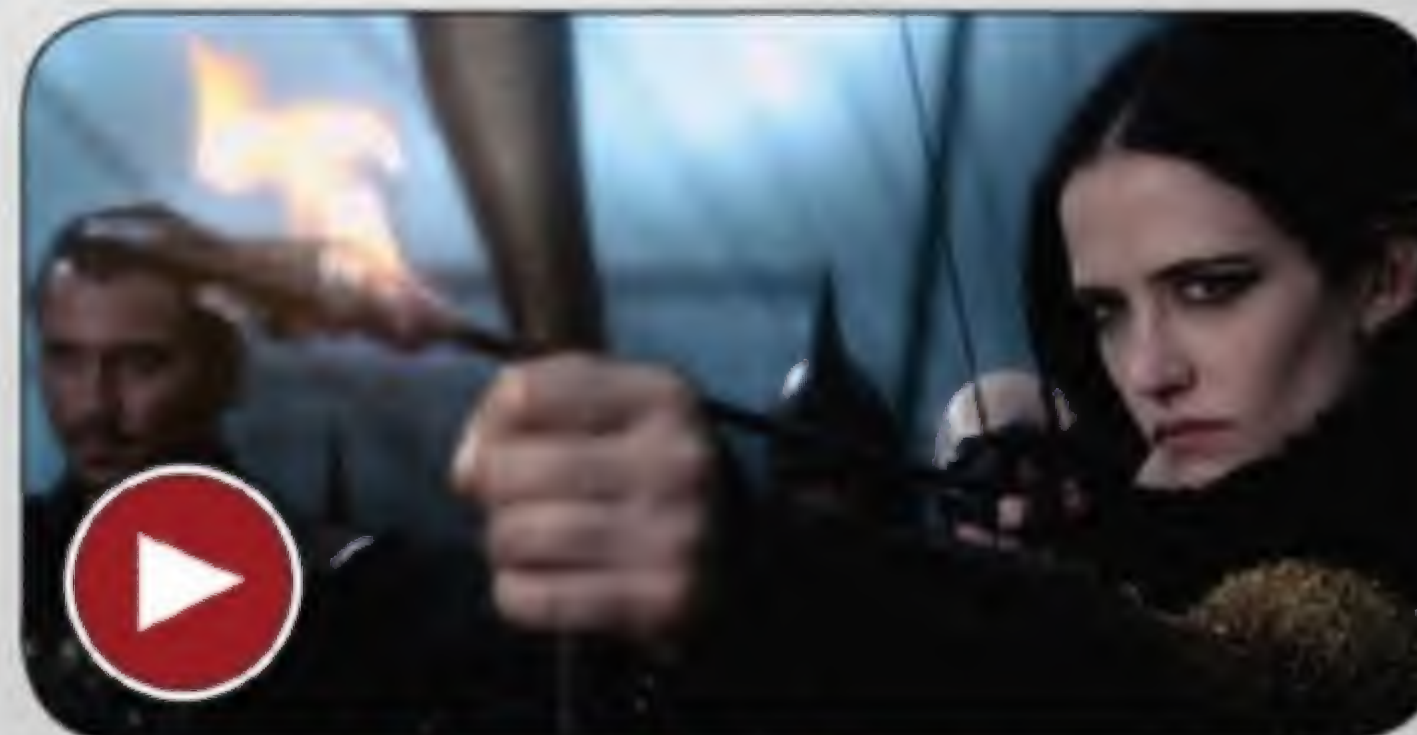
NOAH



You know the story - God, sick of humanity's sins, unleashes a bit of Old Testament wrath and floods the Earth. God chooses Noah (Russell Crowe) and his family to survive (God presumably being either tone deaf, or not having seen *Les Misérables*). Noah builds an ark, simultaneously inventing the world's first zoo and accomplishing a feat of sailing Ben Ainslie would be proud of. Director Darren Aronofsky is one of Hollywood's most interesting and divisive filmmakers - he was responsible for the likes of *Pi*, *The Fountain* and *Black Swan* - and this, with his biggest budget to date could be something quite special indeed. Besides Crowe, the impressive cast includes Jennifer Connelly, Emma Watson, Anthony Hopkins, Ray Winstone and, presumably, a hell of a lot of animals. | IR

300: RISE OF AN EMPIRE

The Spartans return in the sequel to Zack Snyder's 2007 adaptation of 300. Still fighting the war against Xerxes' (Rodrigo Santoro) Persian empire, Themistocles (Sullivan Stapleton) leads a joint strike against their fleet in a titanic battle. Having portrayed the few Greek survivors of the last film, Lena Heady (Dredd) and David Wenham (Lord of the Rings) will be reprising their roles. A further villain in the form of Persian admiral Artemisia is being added to the mix, played by Eva Green (Casino Royale) who will lead their navy against Themistocles. Taking the directing reins this time is Noam Murro (Smart People), with Snyder returning to assist in the screenplay with former co-writer Kurt Johnstad. As with before, the movie will be adapted from a Frank Miller work, this time from his as yet published sequel: Xerxes. Another position which has changed is in the composer, with Tyler Bates (Watchmen) being replaced by Tom Holenborg (collaborator on The Dark Knight Rises). Keeping the stylised combat and comic-book aesthetics, along with the speed-up-slow-down combat effects, the film is retaining many visual elements of the original. Advance footage already show ships colliding, Spartans charging docked vessels and boarding actions via horseback. It is unknown what further campaigns the film will cover in the war beyond the naval battle of Artemisium, but the presence of Darius (Yigal Naor) suggests we might be seeing the famed Battle of Marathon where the tide truly turned in Greece's favour. | CS



DIVERGENT



Just in case The Hunger Games isn't enough dystopian future teen rebellion for you, why not try Divergent? Based on the debut novel of Veronica Roth, Shailene Woodley takes the central strong female role of Beatrice 'Tris' Prior, a girl who does not fit easily into any of the five strictly defined factions that populate future Chicago. She is divergent and the system does not take kindly to those who do not fit in. Kate Winslet also stars as the villainous head of one of the factions and a potential threat to Tris. Typical love interest duties fall on Theo James' numerically named Four, who may be able to help Tris keep her divergence a secret. Expect sequels based on Roth's two remaining books in the series (Insurgent and Allegiant) if this is a success. | PT



THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN 2

Marc Webb returns with the second of Sony's rebooted Spider-Man series. Similarly, Andrew Garfield is back as Peter Parker, and with several new villains to take down. Front and centre we have Jamie Foxx as Max Dillon. The loner Dillon initially sees Spidey as a friend, although it's not long before he becomes unstable, as an accident (involving some electric eels) turns him into the villainous power-crazed Electro. As well as having to short-circuit Electro's crazed plan, Spidey has to deal with his love-life, high school graduation, a pretty impressive looking new costume, and the minor threat of Paul Giamatti's Aleksei Sytsevich, aka the Rhino. Whilst Rhino is set for a small role here, the hard-headed villain has already been confirmed for an expanded role in 2016's *The Amazing Spider-Man 3*. Other new faces to Webb's world are the Osborns; no, not Ozzy and Sharon, but Norman and Harry. Playing eccentric genius cum evil billionaire Norman Osborn, we have the craggy-faced Chris Cooper. In the role of his troubled son, not to mention long-time Peter Parker friend, Harry, we have *Chronicle*'s fantastically complex Dane DeHaan. In further 'new faces' news, there's uncertain roles for Sarah Gadon, Felicity Jones and Colm Feore, with Jones' character having links to the Green Goblin, and Feore's character rumoured to be Adrian Toomes, aka The Vulture, or possibly even Spencer Smythe, creator of the monstrous Spider-Slayers. With a third and fourth film already confirmed for the franchise, there are also rumours that a certain Jim Carrey may make a small cameo as insane serial killer Cletus Kasady, aka Carnage, in order to lay the groundwork for a later film. As for familiar faces, expect to see returns for Emma Stone's Gwen Stacy, Sally Field's Aunt May and, presumably from beyond the grave or in flashback scenes, Martin Sheen's Uncle Ben. In terms of Gwen, she's set to be pivotal to the film, with a certain classic story arc, not to mention life-changing event, from Spider-Man's comic-book past heavily rumoured to be a key part of *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*'s third act. For fear of spoilers, that's all we can really say at this point. With confirmation of the Rhino, Electro and Green Goblin, and speculation that we may get some incarnation of The Vulture, Spencer Smythe, Black Cat, Malice and Carnage, many are claiming that Webb's second Spidey outing is sowing the seeds for a possible cinematic Sinister Six group in either *The Amazing Spider-Man 3* or, more likely, *The Amazing Spider-Man 4*. In fact, various parties involved in the sequel, including Jamie Foxx, have confirmed that there have definitely been talks to bring together the villainous supergroup at some point. That's not all, though. Looking to jazz the title up a bit, not to mention acknowledge the threat of Electro, Sony have been asking for audience feedback at advanced showings of some of their other properties on possible subtitles for *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*. The only two such titles that have leaked at the time of writing are *The Amazing Spider-Man: Price of Power* and *The Amazing Spider-Man: With Great Power*. Whilst they are clearly nods to Electro, the first suggestion sounds like a low-rent TV game show, and the second one would likely have a deep-rooted association back to Sam Raimi's Spider-Man trilogy for most viewers. | AP



TRANSCENDENCE

The film to make Johnny Depp exciting again? Well, with a supporting cast including Kate Mara, Rebecca Hall, Cillian Murphy and Morgan Freeman, it seems the directorial debut from Wally Pfister could be the surprise sci-fi hit of 2014. It follows two scientists who are attempting to achieve Technological Singularity; the point at which computers transcend the abilities of the human brain. But as expected, a radical anti-technology organisation are on standby to wreak havoc with their progress. We're still waiting for our first glimpse, but as Pfister was the cinematographer on the fantastic *Inception*, prepare for an absolute treat for the retinas. | AS



DA VINCI'S DEMONS SEASON 2



The second season of this historical fantasy drama that owes more to *Iron Man*, *MacGyver* and *The Borgias* than anything you'll find in text books promises to be even better than the first. Featuring scripts by popular comic book writers such as Matt Fraction and Jonathan Hickman, the show will take its action to The New World, and pre-publicity implies a cool Renaissance Indiana Jones vibe to this series. | EF

GAME OF THRONES - SEASON 4

After three storming seasons of swords, dragons, blood and betrayal, Game of Thrones returns in 2014 with a whole range of questions awaiting answering. Will Dany and her dragons wage war on Westeros? Will the Wildlings take the wall? Will Joffrey ever get his comeuppance? And perhaps more pressingly, will the showrunners David Benioff and D.B. Weiss be able to top that sensational bloody climax to season three? The Red Wedding shocked millions of viewers and sent a good portion of them into mourning at the same time. It's safe to say that in George R.R. Martin's world, nobody is safe. With that in mind, it remains to be seen who will win and lose in the Game of Thrones come season 4. | RK



LOST GIRL SEASON 4

Your burning questions are the same as ours. Who/what is the Wanderer? Is he Bo's father? Where has he taken her? Why is everyone so deathly afraid of him? What is Lauren running from? Will she and Bo get back together? Will Kenzi succeed in becoming fae? Will Trick return? What happened with Vex and the Morrigan? What is Hale planning? Is Tamsin still alive? Will Dyson ever manage to keep his shirt on? Answers are coming... | AM

APRIL



CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE WINTER SOLDIER

The third installment in Phase Two of Marvel's wildly successful cinematic universe, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* will mark the return of our Star-Spangly hero, Steve Rogers, in a deadly fight against brainwashed baddie the Winter Soldier. Set two years after *The Avengers*, the film will explore the growing friendship between Captain America and Black Widow, as well as focus on Cap's continued struggle with modern society. Chris Evans, Scarlett Johansson, Samuel L. Jackson, and Sebastian Stan all reprise their roles from the previous films, with Frank Grillo and Anthony Mackie coming aboard as Crossbones and Falcon, respectively. It is also worth noting that legendary actor Robert Redford will be playing Alexander Pierce, an old friend of Nick Fury and a distinguished member of the World Security Council. Community directors Joe and Anthony Russo take the directing reins, attempting to make a film that Marvel's President of Production Kevin Feige described as "a '70s political thriller masquerading as a big superhero movie." Considering the star power involved and the competence of the Russo brothers, it wouldn't be a long shot to say that *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* could be the best of the pre-*Avengers*; Age of Ultron films. | HM

GODZILLA

He may have been killed off in Toho Studios' epic *Godzilla: Final Wars* in 2004, but you can't keep the big guy down. Godzilla will literally be the biggest star of 2014 as cinema's favourite stomper of major metropolitan areas returns to the screen. Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Elizabeth Olsen, Bryan Cranston, Juliette Binoche, David Strathairn, Ken Watanabe and Sally Hawkins are among the cast, but Warner Brothers and Legendary Pictures have been tight lipped to the level of total paranoia when it comes to Godzilla himself, with only short glimpses being shown at the San Diego Comic Con. We do know this latest version of Godzilla is physically bigger and less anthropomorphic than we've seen before; his design retains the classic look (though more reptilian in appearance) and the distinctive roar is back, but we're still in the dark about his radioactive breath. Preview footage shows total devastation of a city and it has been broadly hinted that Godzilla will engage in a fierce battle with another creature. Whether this is the return of another familiar monster from Toho isn't known and the studios aren't saying. It's safe to say *Godzilla* will be truer to Toho Studios' original canon than the lamentable 1998 film to the extent that director Gareth Edwards (*Monsters*) has voiced hopes this will be considered part of the Toho legacy. As Toho themselves are distributing the film in Japan we can only hope that they've had a little creative input and more importantly that Hollywood has listened. Either way, the King of the Monsters is back and should the film hit big, he'll be around for a long time to come with sequels already in the planning stages. Evacuate Tokyo! | RP



EDGE OF TOMORROW

After Earth is invaded by an alien race known as Mimics, a war is fought across the globe to repel the invaders. Tom Cruise plays Bill Cage, a PR advisor forced into combat for which he is woefully unprepared and is subsequently killed in battle. However, he inexplicably finds himself caught in a time loop, awaking each morning on the day of his death with all his previous memories. He gradually acquires greater combat experience with each iteration, with the possibility of developing enough skill to eventually escape his inevitable death, and perhaps attain knowledge to help the rest of humanity in the process. An adaptation of light novel *All You Need Is Kill*, *Edge of Tomorrow* also stars Emily Blunt (*Looper*) as super soldier Rita Vrataski (also known as Full Metal Bitch) and Bill Paxton (*Aliens*) as platoon leader General Bartolome. | AM



MALEFICENT



Sleeping Beauty's nemesis Maleficent is one of Disney's most iconic characters, and she finally gets her own live action movie, with a perfectly cast Angelina Jolie as the titular villainess. The film charts Maleficent's story, from an innocent young woman forced to defend her land from an invading army, through to her fatal curse and Princesses Aurora having the kind of epic sleep that would put most students to shame. After initial involvement from both Brad Bird and Tim Burton, *Avatar*'s Oscar winning production designer Robert Stromberg makes his directorial debut with an impressive cast including *Super 8*'s Elle Fanning as Aurora and the potentially unmissable sight of *District 9*'s Sharlto Copley as the king. | IR

X-MEN: DAYS OF FUTURE PAST

Are you ready for what may just be the biggest, and hopefully best, X-Men film of all? Director Bryan Singer, returning to the franchise, assembles an impressive cast line-up that includes such stalwarts as Hugh Jackman, Patrick Stewart, Ian McKellen, James McAvoy, Jennifer Lawrence, and Michael Fassbender. Based on the popular 1980s Marvel Comics storyline, this film stands on its own, but wisely serves as a sequel to the ever-growing film franchise as a whole. While plot points remain vague, it is assumed that Wolverine is sent to the past to prevent a hellish alternative future where mutants are placed in internment camps, and Sentinels reign supreme. Just how Singer will successfully combine the younger and older casts of X-Men and the 2011 prequel film X-Men: First Class is anyone's guess, but a healthy dose of jumping between timelines, past, present, and future, is sure to be in order. If any of the recent sequels stand a chance of giving a healthy shot in the arm to this somewhat aging film series, it's this one. All this combined with the hope that Singer will ret-con many of the unpopular story elements of X-Men: The Last Stand makes for a pretty enticing movie. So, let's get our Adamantium claws sharpened. This summer, an epic battle awaits. | NM





HANNIBAL - SEASON 2

When Bryan Fuller began talking about his plan for Hannibal, he suggested a five-season arc that would culminate with an adaptation of Thomas Harris' Red Dragon. So how will Season 2 bring us closer to Harris' book, especially following this year's twist ending? Although nothing solid has been announced on the plot, things should pick up where we left off; leaving Graham an inmate under the fame hungry Dr. Chiltern, having been framed for the copycat murders by Lecter. This potentially sets Chiltern up as an additional adversary for Graham as he tries to convince the FBI that Lecter is not the man they all think he is. If the promo poster for Season 2 is anything to go by, it looks set to continue the gruesome blend of style and sophisticated horror that made the first season a huge hit. | SM

CONTINUUM - SEASON 3

Alec has absconded with the time travel device, the Freelancers have imprisoned Kiera and the surviving members of Liber8, and Vancouver is slowly slipping into a prototype oligarchy. As ~~Cigarette Smoking Man's~~ Future Alec's plan for Kiera is slowly revealed, Kiera herself likely being forced to form an uneasy alliance with her enemies and Carlos and Betty now having joined Julian (already well on his way to becoming Theseus) Continuum's sliding greyscale of morality will doubtless become further blurred. | AM



WAREHOUSE 13 - SEASON 5



With Paracelsus taking control of the Warehouse, Claudia remaining behind to face him on account of her own growing connection to the building, the others escaping before the power of the vengeful alchemist barred their re-entry, and the result of Myka's cancer operation unknown, there's a lot at stake with little time to resolve it all. The six-episode finale to Warehouse 13 will see exactly how the team hope to fight a foe they not only cannot directly attack, but who also has at his disposal an arsenal of thousands of the most dangerous objects ever inadvertently created. It'll be interesting to see how the eventual resolution will be connected to the 11th hour revelation of Claudia's sister still being alive, along with precisely what makes her so "incredibly dangerous," and if Helena returns, whether or not her and Myka's sapiosexual attraction to each other will finally be acted upon. | AM

CUTE LITTLE BUGGERS

Described as "Gremlins meets Hot Fuzz" by its makers and "a British Critters" by everyone else, Cute Little Buggers is a comedy horror mimicking the style of creature feature B-movies. The plot revolves around the young women of a quiet English village going missing after aliens crash on nearby farmland, and the townspeople having to band together to fight off the invaders. The cast of relative unknowns is led by Swiss actor Kristofer Dayne - last seen as one of Blackbeard's crew in Pirates of the Caribbean 4 and racing champion Mario Andretti in Rush - as the gloriously monikered hero Melchior Haslam. Village sage Mystic Mary - likely an expository cameo - comes in the form of '70s horror queen Caroline Munro, whose magnificent cleavage you may remember from The Golden Voyage of Sinbad, Dracula AD 1972, Starcrash and The Spy Who Loved Me. Given the film's influences, we can likely expect over-the-top gore, gratuitous nudity, referential dialogue and black humour. | AM



DEFIANCE SEASON 2



The second season of the post-alien contact science fiction show will feature characters and content from the associated video game. The character of Alethea (above, middle) has been voted for by the fans, and should feature significantly in the TV series. Should this experiment work, there could well be much more crossover to come. | EF

THE RETURNED



A series that somehow raised more questions as it crept along. The Returned is set to, well, return, for a second season that hopes to maintain the chilling atmosphere that made the debut so fantastic. Of course some answers to the many mysteries of this French supernatural feast would be welcome too. Is there a reason the dead are coming back to life? Will Victor still be the scariest child on TV? What happens now after *that* ending? Anything regarding a potential future plot point for the next season seems to be tightly under wraps, so we'll just have to keep the Mogwai soundtrack on repeat until sometime next year to control our anticipation. Le Lake Pub anyone? | AS

TRANSFORMERS: AGE OF EXTINCTION

Just as it looked like it was time to put the old toys away, Michael Bay confirmed he would be back for a fourth instalment in the Transformers franchise. Mark Wahlberg replaces Shia LaBeouf in the lead role as Cade, a mechanic who ends up caught up in yet another MacGuffin-powered battle between the Autobots and Decepticons. Optimus Prime and Bumblebee return alongside new faces such as the fan-favourite Dinobots, and events take place four years after Chicago was decimated in Dark of the Moon. Nicola Peltz (of Bates Motel) takes the role of Cade's daughter, with Irish actor Jack Reynor playing her racecar driving boyfriend, Shane. The main cast is rounded out by Stanley Tucci and Keisey Grammer as the human villain. Peter Cullen may return for voice duties but Optimus Prime and Bumblebee have both had a makeover/upgrade with more muscle and extra flames added. New to the franchise, Autobot Hound is also confirmed to appear taking the form of a military style tactical vehicle. Paramount are co-producing with a range of Chinese companies in a clear indication that Bay and his team are aiming to please the lucrative Chinese market. Not only will China itself play a prominent role but also stars Li Bingbing and Han Geng have joined the cast. With La Beouf's Sam Witwicky and his comedy sidekick parents out of the picture, Wahlberg and others have signed up for a three-picture deal suggesting Age of Extinction is definitely not going to be the end of this franchise. | PT



HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON 2

The sequel to the surprisingly brilliant and successful How to Train Your Dragon promises to move the story forward and avoid the usual pitfalls that many second movies aimed at children fall for. Rather than more of the same, How to Train Your Dragon 2 will expand the world further, adding more dragons and more places for Hiccup and Toothless to explore, though there will still be plenty of training going on! It's also set five years on from the first one, which means all the cute kids are now becoming adults, and an appropriate amount of growing up angst is expected. It will also be the first DreamWorks movie to use new CGI techniques that promise a more realistic feel to the animation, and this should add to the more mature feel of the sequel. A third movie is also in production, predictably titled How to Train Your Dragon 3. | EF



HERCULES: THE THRACIAN WARS



In a year of two Hercules films, Brett Ratner's version gives you a strong indication of its action-heavy story by having cast Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson in the titular role. Based on the Radical Publishing comic-books of yesteryear, *The Thracian Wars* and *The Knives of Kush* are set to be huge influences on the film. Joining Johnson, we have Joseph Fiennes, John Hurt, Rebecca Ferguson, and Lovejoy himself, Ian McShane. | AP

FALLING SKIES SEASON 4



With the Volm and the Espheni now using Earth as a terrestrial battleground for their eternal war, the men, women and children of the 2nd Massachusetts are once again on the road looking for somewhere to call home. Karen's final warning that the Volm cannot be trusted likely extends further than their desire to ship everyone off to Brazil, while the true nature of Alexis and just how much human and/or alien she is will soon be revealed. | AM

JUPITER ASCENDING



The latest film from Lana and Andy Wachowski is a futuristic tale in which Jupiter Jones (Mila Kunis), a Russian immigrant stuck in a lowly janitor job, finds out she has the perfect genetic make-up and so is destined to become the next ruler of the universe. Well, that would make your day, wouldn't it? Unfortunately, there's a hitch - the current Queen of the Universe has sent Caine (Channing Tatum), a genetically engineered killer spliced with wolf DNA, to kill her. *Jupiter Ascending* also stars Sean Bean as Stinger, a Han Solo-like character, as well as Eddie Redmayne and James D'Arcy. There are comparisons to *Star Wars* inherent in this storyline, and it does sound like an ambitious piece of sci-fi, but given the mixed reaction to recent Wachowski movies *Cloud Atlas* and *Speed Racer*, it's unlikely to reach the heights of such a classic. | KM

DAWN OF THE PLANET OF THE APES

Few fans of the 1960s/1970s Planet of the Apes franchise could have held out much hope for future entries in the series following the creative (if commercially successful) debacle of Tim Burton's 2001 reimagining. But 2011's reboot/prequel *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, directed by Brit Rupert Wyatt, triumphantly kick-started the series with a storyline which paid homage to the original series whilst never subverting its story or its timeline. *Rise*, featuring an astonishing 'motion capture' performance by Andy Serkis, told of Caesar, a super-intelligent, genetically-engineered chimp who orchestrates a revolution against a cruel and oppressive Mankind. *Dawn* moves the story along some fifteen years, after humanity has been all but wiped out by the lethal virus alluded to during *Rise*. Caesar and his apes have become the dominant species but ragtag human survivors find themselves in conflict with the planet's new simian masters and whilst a fragile peace ensues, it soon becomes apparent that a bitter war to determine who is truly the planet's dominant species is inevitable. All change for *Dawn* with director Wyatt bailing out when Fox tightened the film's production schedule: Matt Reeves (*Cloverfield*) is in the director's chair and an all new cast (James Franco's not back reprising his role as Rodman from *Rise*) includes Gary Oldman as resistance leader Dreyfus and Judy Greer joining Serkis in 'motion capture' heaven to play Caesar's chimp squeeze Cornelia. *Dawn* is again scripted by *Rise*'s Rick Jaffa and Amanda Silver (with Scott Z. Burns and Mark Bomback) and whilst *Dawn* looks as if it's going to have a greater action quotient than its predecessor, fans will be hoping to get more of the thoughtful, philosophical intelligent storytelling which made *Rise* such a surprise and such a delight. | PH

TEEN WOLF SEASON 4



Although things now seem to have returned to some semblance of normality after the dual storms of chaos strewn by Deucalion and Julia, life in Beacon Hills is never that easy. Not content with merely orchestrating his own resurrection, Peter now has designs on Scott's newly acquired Alpha status, intending to kill him and steal the power. Following Deaton's warning that their action will attract new dangers, it's unlikely this is the only problem Scott's ramshackle Pack will have to deal with, and we'll also discover if Scott's father has ulterior motives for returning. | AM

PLANES: FIRE AND RESCUE

Cars was hardly the most obvious Pixar film for Disney to pick out for its own spin-off franchise (that'd be The Incredibles, obviously). Nonetheless, Planes was entertaining enough, and after the air racing exploits of the first film, this sequel sees heroic former crop duster Dusty (voiced by Dane Cook) turn his hand to fire fighting. But will it have a repeat of the original's superb Val Kilmer/Anthony Edwards Top Gun reunion? | IR



HERCULES: THE LEGEND BEGINS

Whereas Ratner's Hercules film (see July) seems to look for action, Renny Harlin is looking to ground his film around a love-story, choosing to focus more on relationships than action. That said, the director himself has said that his vision is close to that of Ridley Scott's Gladiator, so audiences should hopefully still be able to get their action fix from the film. Taking on the lead role this time out we have Twilight's Kellan Lutz. | AP



GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY

To the surprise of many, Marvel/Disney decided to pick the Guardians of the Galaxy team to star in one of their Phase Two films and it looks set to be a masterstroke. Helmed by James Gunn, the early images and footage from the movie suggest that we're going to get epic scale, large doses of action, and some dry, quick-witted one-liners that would give Tony Stark a run for his money. Essentially the tale of a group of heroes made up from all across the galaxy, the thought is that Guardians will be used as a nice link between the end of Avengers Assemble and the start of Avengers: Age of Ultron. Thanos, the creepy grinning guy at the end of Whedon's Avengers Assemble, is expected to be present here, although he will merely be overseeing all things evil in order to establish him as the biggest 'big bad' going forward in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. On board as the Guardians team, we have Chris Pratt as the human Peter Quill, aka Star-Lord, whilst former WWE Superstar Dave Bautista will be playing Drax the Destroyer, Star Trek's Zoe Saldana will be playing Gamora, Vin Diesel will be voicing and mo-capping the living tree Groot, and Bradley Cooper is voicing the gun-toting wise-ass Rocket Raccoon. The rather stellar ensemble cast also includes Benicio del Toro, Karen Gillan, Lee Pace, Michael Rooker, Gregg Henry, Ophelia Lovibond, Peter Serafinowicz, John C. Reilly and Glenn Close. | AP



SIN CITY: A DAME TO KILL FOR



Sin City: A Dame to Kill For is co-directors Robert Rodriguez's and Frank Miller's hotly anticipated part prequel, part sequel to 2005's neo-noir crime thriller Sin City. Co-written by Rodriguez, Miller and William Monahan (The Departed) the film incorporates two Sin City graphic novel stories, A Dame to Kill For and Just Another Saturday Night. Also included are two original stories written exclusively for the film. Returning to Basin City are Bruce Willis, Rosario Dawson, and Jessica Alba as Nancy (who this time is running for her life from Senator Roark's men), and Mickey Rourke as Marv (who awakens at a roadside surrounded by dead bodies). Newcomers include Joseph Gordon-Levitt (who plays Johnny, a cocky gambler who beats the wrong man with dire consequences), and Josh Brolin as Dwight McCarthy, a character inherited from Clive Owen who played him in the previous film. Dwight's past is explored, revealing the truth behind his facial reconstruction. Also starring are Eva Green, Ray Liotta and pop diva eccentric Lady Gaga. Undeniably Sin City is a cult favourite but just how well will this starkly stylised, undoubtedly violent and hard boiled monochrome sequel fare? After all, it faces some heavyweight competition this month. This is a movie where a strong opening weekend will be crucial. One thing is certain, it would be a crime to miss it. | CJ

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES



Whether we're happy with it or not, this Michael Bay-produced reboot is happening. Currently shooting, this remake of everyone's favourite pizza-eating ass-kicking reptiles is set to be a CGI-fest of green goodness. Whilst there are actors voicing the turtles, the same guys have also donned full-body motion-capture suits for the film this time round. In the lead roles, we have Pete Ploszek as the katana-wielding Leonardo, Jeremy Howard as brain-box Donatello, Alan Ritchson as wise-cracking Raphael, and Noel Fisher as party dude Michelangelo. Supporting the guys in green, we have Danny Woodburn as Master Splinter, Megan Fox as April O'Neil, Will Arnett as Vernon Fenwick, and the brilliant William Fichtner as Shredder. Very little is known about the plot of the film right now, although early stories suggested that the 'mutant' turtles would be aliens, and there's also been confirmation that Shredder's alias of Oruki Saki has been changed to Eric Sachs. Liberties firmly taken there, which has some quarters calling for Michael Bay's head as he looks to bastardise yet another staple of so many people's childhood. To add further concerns over the film, the release date has already been pushed back several times, giving disgruntled fans even more reason to believe that their worries may just come true. With Bay in a producer role this time out, directorial duties are being handled by Wrath of the Titans' Jonathan Liebesman. | AP

As if it wasn't enough for an entire town threatening to go Lord of the Flies on each other and very few people caring to do much to stop it, there are also indecipherable prophecies and supernatural shenanigans to contend with. Season two of Under the Dome will likely go at least some way to revealing what the hell's going on in the powder keg of Chester's Mill, although anyone familiar with Stephen King's novel should be aware that the ultimate revelation behind the dome will not be the same. Which, quite frankly, is something of a relief. | AM

UNDER THE DOME SEASON 2



With the modernised tale of a young Norman Bates' descent into madness currently on UK screens, our US counterparts have seen Season 1 come to an end... and it did not disappoint. With Season 1 finding Norman (Freddie Highmore) and his mother Norma (Vera Farmiga) relocating to a rather familiar looking motel, the series added twists, turns, confusion, answers, further questions, and a menacingly insane town underbelly to the mythology of our murderous young taxidermist. Now that the familiar Bates, along with Norman's half-brother Dylan (Max Thieriot), have firmly made White Pine Bay their home, we've seen the slow reveal of just a glimpse into Norman's dark side, and the groundings of what we know to come to the fore for him in later life. As the first season came to a conclusion, we were left appreciatively nodding as Norman made certain choices that will shape how things turn out for the troubled teen. With it clearly apparent where Norman gets his 'quirks' from, Farmiga's Norma is just as troubled and unstable as her son, with her showing so many different layers to her sexually sinister nutjob. Fantastic turns from Highmore, Farmiga, Thieriot and the likes of Olivia Cooke and Nicola Peltz give us a lot of optimism that this show is here for the long-run. Managing to juggle the modern-day setting and the traditional Psycho elements, the continuation of Bates Motel is set to be one of the TV highlights of 2014. | AP

BATES MOTEL SEASON 2



DOCTOR WHO SERIES 8

After Peter Capaldi takes over the TARDIS in this year's Christmas special, his first full series as the Twelfth Doctor will air in autumn 2014. Jenna Coleman will continue co-starring as Clara Oswald, and with her 'Impossible Girl' mystery out of the way, series eight will explore other aspects of Clara's life, as well as how she copes with the new Doctor. The series is rumoured to run for twelve episodes, with showrunner Steven Moffat undoubtedly having another big arc planned out. Excitingly, Kill List and Sightseers director Ben Wheatley is lined up to direct the series' first two episodes. Jack Lothian (Ashes to Ashes) is a new writer on board, and Neil Cross (series seven's The Rings of Akhaten and Hide) will be returning. Fan favourite Neil Gaiman has also stated he's writing another episode, possibly including a scary new monster of his own creation, though this may end up not being seen until series nine. The announcement of Capaldi as the new Doctor was met with widespread enthusiasm, so let's hope his Doctor lives up to expectations and brings the series back to scratch after the much-criticised series seven. | KM

THE MAZE RUNNER



The latest Young Adult adaptation to try and make a grab at the Twilight and Hunger Games market is 20th Century Fox's adaptation of James Dashner's first book in his Maze Runner series. The film tells the story of Thomas, a young man who remembers nothing but his name. He wakes up in a community of boys that is surrounded by a stone maze, through which they must try to escape; a maze that is patrolled by part animal, part machine creatures known as Grievers. With a cast of young up and coming actors that includes Dylan O'Brien (Teen Wolf), Will Poulter (Son of Rambow), Thomas Brodie-Sangster (Game of Thrones) and Kaya Scodelario (Skins) Maze Runner certainly has the potential to be 2014's Hunger Games. Well, along with Mockingjay Part One that is. | SM

TRUE BLOOD SEASON 7



Charlaine Harris's 'Southern Vampire Mysteries' series came to an end this year, and in 2014 its long-running TV adaptation True Blood will follow suit, bowing out with a seventh season. As is typical with the show, the previous finale set up the coming arc, which sees the Hepatitis-V virus spread among the country's vampire population creating an even deadlier threat. In an effort to protect the citizens of Bon Temps from this new enemy, recently appointed town mayor Sam Merlotte and Bill Compton have come up with a unique proposition: each resident will pair with a vampire, and in exchange for the creature's protection must keep them in blood, allowing their allies to feed from them. Will the rather icky plan work? Will Eric survive his nasty case of sunburn? Will Sookie actually do something interesting this season? We'll find out when these final episodes begin to roll out later next year. (But in answer to that final question: probably not.) | KH



STAR WARS: REBELS

With The Clone Wars concluding and Order 66 offing most of the Jedi, Star Wars is set to return to the time of the original trilogy: The Rebellion era. The series follows the crew of the starship Ghost as the Rebellion is formed against the Galactic Empire and surviving Jedi are rooted out by the series' villain, the crimson lightsaber wielding Inquisitor, agent of Darth Vader. Along with returning presence Dave Filoni (Star Wars: The Clone Wars) is Greg Weisman (Young Justice), both of who will serve as executive producers. Head writer for the series is a name recognised for his film work, Simon Kinberg (X-Men: First Class). Though unconfirmed at the time of going to print, voice talent is reported to consist of Freddie Prinze Jr. (Mass Effect), Tim Curry (Dragon Age: Origins), David Oyelowo (Red Tails) and Steve Blum (Cowboy Bebop). It is as of yet unknown how the series will affect Star Wars: The Force Unleashed or the decades running Expanded Universe novels, both of which have covered how the Rebellion began. However, images recognisable to long-time fans have shown up in promotional works, with a ship resembling a TY-2000 freighter fleeing TIE fighters. Disney and Lucasfilm are keeping their cards close to their chest with this one, but from what we've seen so far, Rebels looks promising. | CS

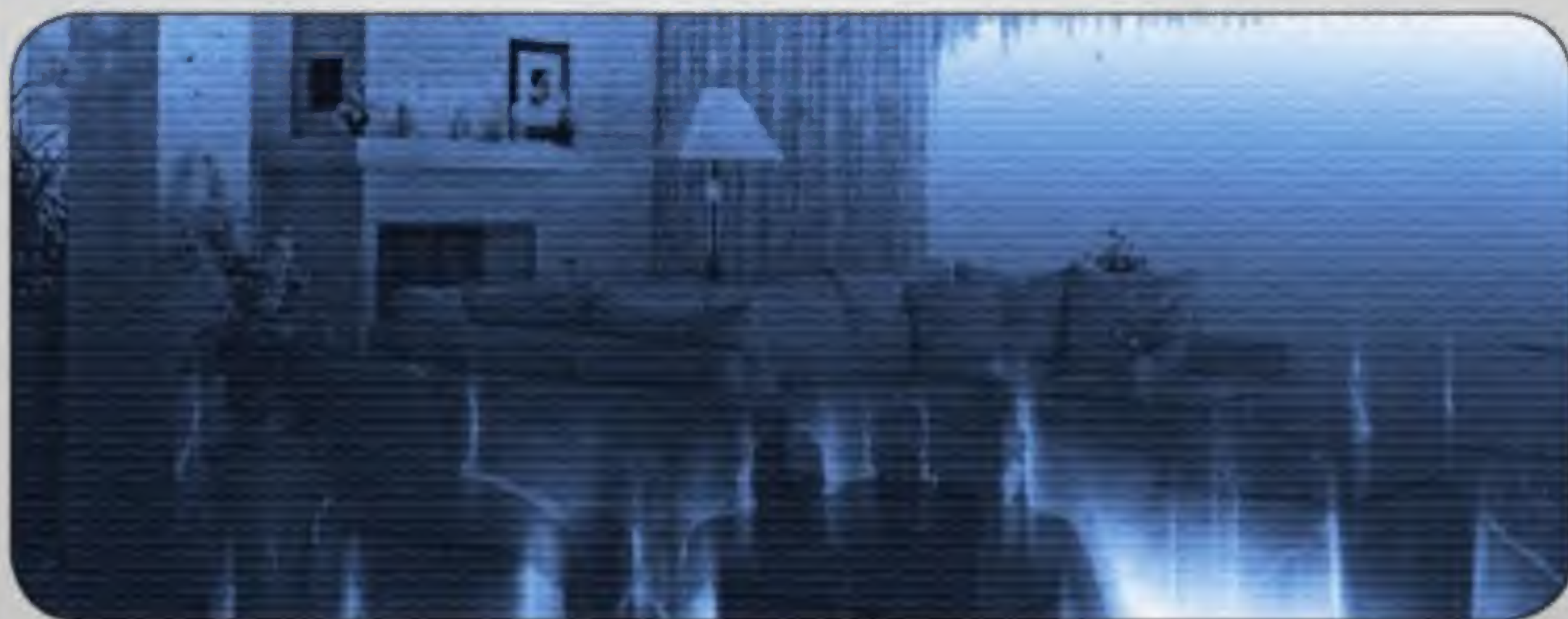
BOXTROLLS



With the likes of Paranorman and Coraline under their belt, Animation studio Laika are fast gaining a reputation as the go-to company for animated children's fantasy adventure with more than a touch of the surreal. Boxtrolls is the story of Eggs, a small boy who has been raised by underground trash-collecting beasties, the Boxtrolls. Ben Kingsley will take the role of the inevitably scenery chewing villain Archibald Snatcher, pest exterminator. | EF



PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 5



Not one to leave a cash cow even partially unmilked, Blumhouse are giving us a double dose of PA action this year with Gregory Plotkin's direct sequel in the franchise, *Paranormal Activity 5*. This marks Plotkin's first time in the directing chair, having previously edited the first four entries. The writers of PA 5 are Jason Pagan and Andrew Stark (fresh off the forthcoming sci-fi thriller *Almanac*). As to the plot, Blumhouse are keeping firmly schtum. The big question of course is whether either *Paranormal Activity 5* or *Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones* shed any more light on the whole story of the sisters Kati and Kristi, their grandmother's coven, the demon Toby and the significance of Kristi's son, Hunter? Our guess that Blumhouse will want to keep audiences speculating on these little mysteries a while (and a few more sequels) longer... | JT

SLEEPY HOLLOW SEASON 2

The premise for supernatural cop show *Sleepy Hollow* involves seven years of strife, which neatly encompasses the show's planned seven series. Year two in this quiet American town, that just happens to be the staging post for the Apocalypse, promises a deepening of the conspiracies that hold the town together. There has been no confirmation that the next season will actually be scary; if it's anything like the first, probably not. | EF



THE WALKING DEAD SEASON 5

Though season four won't finish until early 2014, we'll be seeing season five begin before the year's out. The current season will see the fall of the prison and the return of the Governor, so Rick Grimes and his group will be lucky to remain both walking and alive by this point. After a recurring role throughout season four, *Twilight*'s Christian Serratos could move up to regular status as Rosita, likely alongside fellow comic book characters Sergeant Abraham Ford and Doctor Eugene Porter. | KM





THE HUNGER GAMES: MOCKINGJAY (PART 1)

With events really beginning to catch fire in 2013's *The Hunger Games* sequel, the trilogy closing book *Mockingjay* has been split into two films *a la* *Twilight*. *Mockingjay* Parts 1 and 2 will be released a year apart with the first hitting in 2014. Jennifer Lawrence returns as kick-ass Katniss Everdeen, now a vital symbol of the rebellion and even deadlier thorn in the side of Donald Sutherland's President Snow. Joined by Julianne Moore as the President of presumed dead District 13 and returning cast members Philip Seymour Hoffman, Josh Hutcherson and Liam Hemsworth, this time it really is war. Beginning the adaptation of the most morally complex and brutal of the novels, *Mockingjay* Part 1 will have a great deal to cover before setting up the epic climax where Katniss and co take their rebellion right to the Capitol. | PT

NIKITA Season 4



A six-episode finale brings to a close this reimagining of a spinoff of a remake of the 1990 French action film, *La Femme Nikita*. With Division destroyed for good and most of Nikita's dwindling collection of enemies either dead, turned or incarcerated, only the sociopathic Amanda and her new army of technological mercenaries The Invisible Hand stand between her and her long-sought peace. Given the regular unintended collateral damage of Nikita's actions and the lethality of the crossfire her allies often find themselves in, there really is no way to predict who, if anyone, will be left standing when the dust clears. | AM

Adapted from Mark Millar and Dave Gibbons' comic-book of the same name, Matthew Vaughn helms this super-smooth, ruthless spy story. British secret agent Jake (Colin Firth) looks to recruit his rebellious nephew Gary (Taron Egerton) to join him in taking down the bad guys. As well as including Samuel L. Jackson, Sophie Cookson and Michael Caine, there's also rumours of Mark Hamill signing on to play himself in a small role. | AP

THE SECRET SERVICE



INTERSTELLAR

What would you do if the world ran out of corn? While corn may not be as mystical as dreams, or as culturally iconic as Batman, it's the motivating factor in Christopher Nolan's latest effort *Interstellar*. It does get more exciting – the solution to this problem isn't to eat something else but to explore space through the science of wormholes. Matthew McConaughey leads the gang of interstellar explorers, joined by a remarkably large cast of big names – Anne Hathaway, Jessica Chastain, Casey Affleck, John Lithgow, Matt Damon, and too many more to list here. The production has been kept tightly under wraps, so there's very little information out there as to who any of these will be playing. Nevertheless, we do know that *Interstellar* will have solid scientific thought behind it, with the space travel inspired by the theories of physicist Kip Thorne, as well as political charge – set photos show a town ravished by a dust storm, implying this is one of those 'what'll happen if you don't treat the planet right' films. In the true tradition of how to describe any recent sci-fi film, it's 'Inception meets *Silent Running*'. Combining blockbuster entertainment with intellectual sensibility is what Nolan does well, and he's a talented enough storyteller to weave the science and the politics in with an entertaining and complex story – this has the potential to be stellar. | KM

THE HOBBIT: THERE AND BACK AGAIN



Regardless of the controversial decision to split the rather slender novel into three parts, there's little doubt that Peter Jackson's six-movie Tolkien odyssey has brought Middle-earth to life in a way few felt possible. After various diversions involving elves, spiders, trolls, shapeshifters and that bloody hedgehog, this is the big one. Without giving too much away for the six people who've never read the book, the Hobbit climaxes with the Battle of Five Armies, an almighty scrap featuring dwarves, elves, men, orcs and eagles. If early word is to be believed, the battle dwarfs (no pun intended) the magnificent Helm's Deep and Pelennor Fields sequences of the Rings trilogy. Add to that the small yet to be resolved matters of Smaug and The Necromancer, and this looks set to be an action packed climax to Peter Jackson's adventures in the world of Tolkien. At least until he announces his inevitable 60-part adaptation of The Silmarillion anyway. | IR

INTO THE WOODS



Adapted from the 1986 musical, Rob Marshall's Into the Woods is to serve as an intertwined world of Brothers Grimm tales. Various figures from Rapunzel to the Big Bad Wolf encounter one another, linked by the presence of a vengeful Witch and childless couple. Along with recognisable names like Meryl Streep, Chris Pine and Johnny Depp having signed on, there is plenty more talent involved such as Oscar-winning cinematographer Dion Beebe. | CS

NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM 3



Ben Stiller has agreed to play the role of accursed museum attendant Larry Daley yet again for Night at the Museum 3. The movie is planned for a Christmas release, and filming will start in February. No plot details have been released as yet, but it is unlikely that it will be much different from the previous two movies. Expect a change of museum and some familiar exhibits, and very little in the way of surprises. | EF

ALMOST HUMAN



In 2048, LAPD officers are partnered with battle-ready androids designed with a rigid set of protocols and unfeeling logic. It was this lack of compassion that left Detective John Kennex (Karl Urban) stranded in a firefight and subsequently left comatose by an explosive. Awakening two years later and returning to the force, he no longer trusts any kind of robotics, refusing to accept even the synthetic parts his crippled body was rebuilt with. When his android partner meets with an "accident," he is instead assigned Dorian (Underworld: Awakening's Michael Ealy), one of a discontinued series capable of experiencing emotion. With John now part machine and Dorian part human, as well as sci-fi action and futuristic procedurals, we can likely expect ruminations on what the nature of humanity truly means, such as in the works of Philip K. Dick and Isaac Asimov. | AM

THE GREEN INFERNO



With Eli Roth on directing duties, The Green Inferno harks back to the days of Cannibal Holocaust and the like. Focusing on a group of well-meaning student activists from New York who travel to the Amazon to do some good, all doesn't quite go to plan. Initially doing their best to save a dying tribe, things take a turn for the sinister when the very same tribe they are trying to help end up turning on them and take them hostage. After a mixed few years, Roth is hoping to get back to the success levels he had with some of his earlier efforts, such as Cabin Fever and Hostel. Here's hoping the immensely

passionate and knowledgeable Roth manages to bring new life to not only his directing career but to a sub-genre that is often left wanting. | AP

HELIX



Helix sees the return of Ron Moore, in his first series since the end of Battlestar Galactica and spin-off Caprica. The Killing's Billy Campbell leads a team from the Centre For Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to investigate an outbreak at a high-tech Arctic research station. The virus they find there, along with other experiments conducted by scientists, has the potential to save, or destroy humanity. Syfy were so impressed with the concept that they bypassed the traditional pilot, ordering a full 13-part series. Besides Campbell, the cast includes Moore's fellow Star Trek alumni Jeri Ryan and The Wolverine's Hiroyuki Sanada. It's not Moore's first trip to polar research stations – he was involved in the 2011 prequel to The Thing – but this is a very different beast. Judging by the little we've seen so far, expect a superior, creepy, intelligent thriller. | IR

BITTEN

Bitten is the story of Elena (Smallville's Kara Kent, Laura Vandervoort), the world's only female werewolf, as she is called from her home in Toronto back to upstate New York at the behest of Jeremy (Greg Bryk; Immortals), the Alpha of the Pack, werewolf society's self-appointed governing body. Non-Pack werewolves (referred to dismissively as Mutts) have started murdering humans, which threatens to expose the lycanthropes' existence to the mundane world, a crime that must be met with lethal force. Adapted from the first of Kelly Armstrong's novel series Women of the Otherworld, there is also a romantic streak cutting through the tale, seen in Elena's mixed feelings flitting between her safe and sensible human boyfriend Philip who she's trying to build a normal life with, and her passionate but unreliable

werewolf ex-lover Clay (Greyston Holt; Alcatraz), the one responsible for originally turning her. | AM

BLACK SAILS

A prequel to Treasure Island set 20 years prior to the novel's events, Black Sails tells of the exploits of Captain Flint, Long John Silver, Billy Bones and the crew of the Walrus (no sign of Israel Hands, Black Dog, Blind Pew or Ben Gunn yet) as they loot and plunder the Spanish Main. Despite being a prequel to a work of fiction, a number of real life pirates such as Charles Vane, Calico Jack Rackham and Anne Bonny are also principal characters. The intertwining lives of these three means that historical events will likely be featured in the series, as well as the trio's eventual fates. | AM

CROSSBONES

Legendary pirate Blackbeard (John Malkovich) reigns over the rogue nation island of New Providence, a haven of debauchery for outlaws and outcasts. Into this wretched hive of scum and villainy steps assassin Tom Lowe (Richard Coyle; Grabbers), sent to take down the charismatic leader. However, complications arise when Lowe begins to admire the political ideals espoused by the pirate king, and also finds himself falling for Kate (Claire Foy; Season of the Witch), a governor's daughter and member of Blackbeard's crew. | AM

INTELLIGENCE



Project Clockwork is a program designed to give humans the capabilities of computers. Intelligence agent Gabriel Black (Lost's Josh Holloway) is implanted with an experimental microchip that allows him to mentally interact with any electronic device and instantly retrieve any information remotely accessible. Something of a loose cannon at the best of times, he is assigned Secret Service agent Riley Neal (Meghan Ory of Once

Upon a Time) to keep him in line and on mission, and also to prevent the technology from falling into enemy hands. | AM

[REC] 4: APOCALYPSE

[REC] was a terrifying Spanish rollercoaster; [REC] 2 a freaky cinematic first person shooter. [REC] 3 nearly ruined the franchise, ditching the found footage and replacing it with misjudged comedy. Now director Jaume Balagueró returns to the series, continuing the story of the first two films and confining the zombie infested action to an off shore oil tanker. Expect it to reanimate the seriously scary franchise. | PT

TUSK

After Kevin Smith dipped his toe into the murky waters of horror with *Red State*, the director has again put off his long-talked about 'retirement' to return to filmmaking, and to horror, with *Tusk*. An idea from one of his podcasts, the film focuses on a man and his walrus, or lack thereof. Returning home from being lost at sea with a walrus, he puts out an ad for a roommate. The new roommate gets to live rent free... if he dresses in a walrus suit for a portion of each day, having to act like the animal as well. Matters then take a sinister turn. The always-excellent Michael Parks is playing the walrus-loving home-owner, whilst Justin Long is set to don the rubber suit. Genesis Rodriguez (*The Last Stand*) and Haley Joel Osment also star as Long's partner and podcast co-host respectively, who set out to find their missing friend. | AP

ONCE UPON A TIME IN WONDERLAND



Spinning off from fairytale blender

Once Upon A Time, ...In Wonderland sees Alice (Sophie Lowe; *Road Kill*) escape from a mental institution with the aid of the Knave of Hearts (Michael Socha; *Being Human*) and the White Rabbit (John Lithgow) to return to Wonderland to find her genie lover Cyrus (Peter Gadiot; *13Hrs*) and face the villainous Red Queen (Emma Rigby; *Demons Never Die*) and sorcerer Jafar (Naveen Andrews; *Lost*). Although the Red Queen is a different character from Cora, the Queen of Hearts, her prowess in magic likely means they once crossed paths, the first of many promised references to the mothership show. While most TV nowadays quickly develops into episodic sagas, Wonderland will be a contained story resolved at the season finale. While not necessarily precluding further seasons, if cancelled, fans won't be left with an unresolved cliffhanger. | AM

OUTLANDER

No, not an expansion of the little-seen 2008 pseudo-Beowulf sci-fi film, but a small screen adaptation of a series of novels best described as historical romance. In 1946, ex-army nurse Claire Randall is mysteriously transported back in time to 1743 and promptly saved from Black Jack - a sadistic English Army Captain and her husband's ancestor - by a group of Highlanders. To avoid being handed back to the English soldiers, she is forced to marry young clansman Jamie Fraser - full name James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser, in case you weren't sure he was Scottish - who she finds herself falling for, despite her fidelity to her husband and knowing that in three years time the Jacobite Uprising will be halted by the carnage of Battle of Culloden. The series has been adapted by *Battlestar Galactica*'s Ronald D Moore and is produced by Starz, which has previously given us the slightly mental *Da Vinci's Demons* and utterly mental *Spartacus*. | AM

UTOPIA - SEASON 2

The second season of the acclaimed conspiracy theory show promises to take us into even greater headscratcher territory. With Jessica now in the hands of the Network, along with the secret of Janus in her blood, there seems to be no one standing in their way. Plot specifics currently remain scarce, but we've been promised that as well as

our nominal heroine, childlike hitman Arby will also be returning, and that "a lot of people will die." | AM

MAGGIE

Arnold Schwarzenegger and Abigail Breslin together at last? Little Miss Sunshine herself is becoming a zombie in the black list script about a teen girl who becomes infected when a virus sweeps across the Midwest. Arnie is the father who must oversee his daughter's slow transformation along with wife Joely Richardson. Though it may have made the black list of best unproduced screenplays in 2011, it has not been an easy ride to the big screen. Both Paddy Considine and Chloe Grace Moretz were originally pegged to star before Big Arnie and Little Miss Breslin eventually came aboard. With big budget *Warm Bodies* and micro-budget *Colin*, Maggie could make humanised zombies a sub-genre with a life of its own. | PT

HOT TUB TIME MACHINE 2

John Cusack jumps out of the tub for this sequel to 2010's *Hot Tub Time Machine*. The rest of the cast including Craig Robinson, Clark Duke, Rob Corddry and Chevy Chase remain, with *Parks and Recreation* star Adam Scott and *Community*'s Gillian Jacobs also dipping their toes in this time. After travelling to the '80s first time round, it looks likely the buddies may end up in the future for the sequel. | PT

THE ZERO THEOREM



It's fair to say ex-Python Terry Gilliam, the man behind imaginative classics *Brazil*, *Time Bandits*, and *12 Monkeys*, hasn't been on form recently - but his next project could be a return to greatness. Set in a gaudily-coloured Orwellian dystopia, *The Zero Theorem* follows Qohen Leth (Christoph Waltz), a reclusive and angst-ridden computer

genius who, under orders from the mysterious 'Management' (Matt Damon), locks himself away in a burnt-out church and attempts to solve the titular theorem – if he can prove that $0 = 100$, he can finally conclude that life is meaningless. This work, however, is interrupted by femme fatale Bainsley (Mélanie Thierry) and Management's teenage son Bob (Lucas Hedges). The film looks extravagantly fantastic, like a twenty-first century take on Brazil's surreality, and has a promising cast, also including David Thewlis, Tilda Swinton and Ben Whishaw. The Zero Theorem could be Gilliam's best film in a long time. | KM

THE 100



From Warners/CBS television comes writer Jason Rothenberg's Post-Apocalyptic/Juvenile Delinquent sci-fi drama, *The 100*. Set 97 years after civilization is destroyed by nuclear war, a spaceship full of young offenders (one hundred of them to be precise – hence the title) is sent back to the Earth to repopulate. Sounds like *Misfits* in Space. Starring *Sons of Anarchy*'s Chris Browning and *90210* alumnus Marie Avgeropoulos. | JT

DOMINION

Dark Skies helmer and ex-visual effects supervisor Scott Stewart directs the Syfy pilot for *Dominion*, an epic supernatural action drama set 25 years after the events of Stewart's 2010 movie, *Legion*. Taking up the storyline in the aftermath of the war between angels and mankind, the series follows the story of a rebellious young soldier (Christopher Eden) who finds he holds the key to the saviour of mankind. Anthony Head and Alan Dale also star. | JT

OUIJA

The Knowing and The Possession writer-director team Juliet Snowden and Styles White bring us *Ouija* for Blumhouse Entertainment. Originally planned as a big-budget adventure movie with McG (*Terminator Salvation*) attached to direct, White and Styles were brought in to refashion the movie in the Blumhouse 5 million dollar budget style. Details of the plot have been kept under wraps but our guess is that the story involves a Ouija board. Probably. | JT

IN THE FLESH SERIES 2

The acclaimed BBC3 series, created and written by Dominic Mitchell, takes us to a battered Britain recovering from the ravages of an 'undead' uprising, and the attempts of the undead who have survived and have been treated for their condition – suffering from PDS (Partially Deceased Syndrome) but referred to as 'rotters' – to reintegrate into their shattered communities. Series two, running to six episodes this time, returns viewers to the bleak Northern town of Roarton where a fragile peace exists between the living and the 'undead'. Keiren Walker (Luke Newberry) is trying to remain under the radar whilst planning to escape from his own suspicious community. But beyond Roarton trouble is brewing. The radical 'Pro-Living' Party Victus is gaining power within the Government with a resulting spate of PDS terrorism linked to the so-called Undead Liberation Army. When new and explosive characters representing both Victus and the ULA arrive in Roarton, Keiren discovers that his plans are thrown into disarray as both parties set their sights on him and he finds himself caught in an emotional crossfire. Returning to the series alongside Luke Newberry are Emily Bevan as Keiren's friend/fellow zombie Amy, Harriet Cains as his feisty sister Jem, Kenneth Cranham as Vicar Oddie, Kevin Sutton as Gary and Steve Cooper and Marie Critchley as Keiren's parents Steve and Sue. New cast members include Wunmi Mosaku (*Dancing on the Edge*) as local MP Maxine Martin and Emmett J Scanlan (*The Fall*) as charismatic disciple of the Undead Prophet Simon. | PM

THE LEFTOVERS

Based on Tom Perrotta's 2010 best seller, series creator Damon Lindelof follows up the phenomenally successful *Lost* with this post-apocalyptic satirical drama. Set in the fictional town of Mapleton, *The Leftovers* focuses on the mysterious disappearance of over one hundred of the town's occupants and the effect this has on those who are left behind. Stephen King described Perrotta's novel as "The best *Twilight Zone* episode you never saw", and indeed the novel has been widely praised as a realistic and believable depiction of The Rapture. It's easy to see then why Lindelof would be the go-to guy for a TV adaptation. Justin Theroux, Liv Tyler and Christopher Eccleston star. We'd say things are looking good, but the presence of Peter Berg as director,

after the fiasco that was *Battleship*, makes us hesitate just a tad... | JT

RAZE



Completed back in 2012, Josh C. Waller's *Raze* is finally set to get a full release. An intensely brutal combination of *Fight Club*, *Battle Royale*, *Death House* and *Best of the Best*, the film features a group of women who are kidnapped and forced to fight each other to the death. Failure to compete results in a family member being killed. The two leads of the film are the Conan the Barbarian remake's Rachel Nichols and the fantastically badass Zoe Bell, best known for her turn in QT's *Death Proof* and for carrying out Uma's stunt work in *Kill Bill*. | AP

HORNS



In Alexandre Aja's dark fantasy thriller based on the 2010 novel by Joe Hill, Danielle Radcliffe stars as Ignatius "Ig" Perrish, a young man who awakens and finds he has horns growing from his head, and the ability to compel people to reveal their deepest secrets. Using this newfound ability, Perrish attempts to clear his name as he is accused of his girlfriend's (Juno Temple) murder. Sounds baaarmy to us; get it? *Horns*, like a goat, oh never mind. | JB

BIRDMAN

Directed by 21 Grams helmer Alejandro González Iñárritu, Birdman tells the story of egotistical actor Riggan Thomson as he tries to mount a Broadway play in a bid to move out of the shadow of the iconic superhero role (the Birdman of the title) he once played. There have been movies before that have tried to do a twist on the superhero genre (with varying success), but the master stroke here is in its casting of one-time Batman Michael Keaton as Thomson. Keaton is joined by a stellar cast, including former comic book movie alumni Edward Norton (The Incredible Hulk) and Emma Stone (The Amazing Spider-Man), as well as Zach Galifianakis (G-Force), Naomi Watts (King Kong) and Andrea Riseborough (Oblivion). | SM

TBC [To Be Confirmed]

dual issues of Sarah being able to have children and Kira's quick healing could be linked; perhaps they both relate to Kira's father, whose identity might not prove to be such a non-issue after all. | AM

STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS SEASON 6



Last March we felt a great disturbance in the schedule, as if millions of pixels cried out in terror, and were suddenly silenced. Or was that just Disney sabering The Clone Wars? The animation has evolved beautifully across the series, along with the writing, innovation and action. Season 5 may have been force-choked a tad by the odd wonky story arcs (Colonel Gascon's missions in particular) but the Sith/Mandalore saga really came into its own. The story was cinematic and full of enough developments to make fans jump higher than Salacious Crumb after a zap to the knackers. Also noticeable was the evolution of Ahsoka, from bratty annoyance who you wanted Grievous to cleave in twain, to the complex young Togrutan we were eager to see more of. Yes, this next array of episodes will be the end of The Clone Wars but there is much to see resolved yet. With Abrams' Episode VII, new animated show Star Wars Rebels, and a new series of spin-off feature films all planned, Star Wars is alive and well, but still end, the clone wars, will. | JB

Extraordinary Gentlemen and Anno Dracula, Penny Dreadful is a new TV show starring Josh Hartnett, Eva Green, Billie Piper and Timothy Dalton. Taking a comprehensive approach to received Victoriana, the show, which is described as a 'psychosexual drama', will feature such juicy tropes as Egyptology, spiritualism, the scramble for Africa and the Irish community in London. Produced by Showtime, the US network that brought us The Tudors and The Borgias, Penny Dreadful is the brainchild of Skyfall writer John Logan and also features Sam Mendes in the producer's chair. ? MN

WOLF CREEK 2



Greg McLean returns to the Australian outback to direct this sequel to his attention-grabbing 2005 original, which sees another group of unfortunate back-packers fall prey to the maniacal and murderous Mick Taylor (a returning John Jarratt). | JB

ORPHAN BLACK SEASON 2

As shadowy cabals gradually reveal themselves, the girls now have three groups to contend with: religious fanatics the Proletheans, transhumanism advocates the Neolutionists, and the mysterious organisation who created them for as-yet unspecified reasons. As well as (possibly) more clones, new characters will include Cal, a "ruggedly handsome" woodsman and Henrick Johanssen, the leader of a Prolethean splinter group who have embraced science. Tangentially, the

HOW TO CATCH A MONSTER

Not content with melting ladies hearts whilst ascending the acting status quo, Ryan Gosling makes his directorial debut this coming year and it could cause ripples. The film sees a mother's life take a turn for the dark, whilst her young son finds a road to an underwater world. For some reason we doubt it will be populated by Gunguns but you never know. How to Catch a Monster is a neo-noir fantasy that certainly has meat on its bones in the cast department, starring Christina Hendricks, Saoirse Ronan, former Doctor Matt Smith and Eva Mendes. | JB

OCULUS



Mike Flanagan's feature length adaptation of his award-winning 2009 short film sees one-time Doctor Who companion Karen Gillan play a young woman trying to exonerate her brother of his murder charge by showing that paranormal forces were to blame. (Wonder how many times that defence has been used in court?) With Battlestar Galactica's Katee Sackhoff also present, this could well be a paranormal activity worth investigating. | JB

PENNY DREADFUL

At some point in the future, we'll have to explain to our kids that no, Dracula, Frankenstein's Monster and Dorian Gray didn't actually appear in one another's novels, such is our love for teaming them up. A product of the same rich vein as The League of

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OUTSIDE THE BOX



All the news from the worlds of Doctor Who with Paul Mount



DVD RELEASE FOR RECOVERED CLASSIC EPISODES!

Hot on the heels of last month's BBC announcement - and the subsequent iTunes download release - of the recovery of nine previously-missing 1960s *Doctor Who* episodes comes news of the DVD release of the first of the recovered stories to coincide with this month's Fiftieth Anniversary celebrations. 1968's underrated and massively-entertaining six-part serial *The Enemy of the World* - which sees Patrick Troughton turning in a bravura performance as villainous Mexican dictator Salamander - will be released on DVD in the UK on 25th November. The serial, now complete following the return of the missing episodes 1,2,4,5 and 6, has been impressively restored and remastered with initial reports and preliminary cover designs suggesting the DVD release will comprise two discs, although no information is currently available in relation to any 'special features' to be included on the release. The other recovered serial *The Web of Fear* (which is still currently missing its third episode), is due to be released on DVD on 24th February 2014.

DOCTOR WHO AT THE CINEMA

The BBC also confirmed last month the full details of the promised cinema screenings of the 3D *Doctor Who* anniversary special *The Day of the Doctor*. The 75-minute episode, written by Steven Moffat and starring Matt Smith, David Tennant, Jenna Coleman, Billie Piper and John Hurt, screens simultaneously on 23rd November all over the world but also in selected cinemas in the UK, Ireland, the USA, Canada, Germany and Russia with further territories still to be confirmed at the time of writing. Says the BBC: "In addition to the global TV broadcast, hundreds of cinemas in the UK and around the world are also confirming their plans to screen the hotly anticipated special episode simultaneously in full 3D, giving fans another unique opportunity to be part of a truly global celebration for the iconic British drama series. 216 VUE, Cineworld, Odeon, BFI and Picturehouse

cinemas in the UK and Ireland have already confirmed their participation. Locations include London, Birmingham, Belfast, Dublin, Liverpool, Cardiff and Edinburgh. Internationally, German, Russian, American and Canadian fans will gather in cinemas to enjoy the simulcast release, approximately 30 cinemas in Germany will screen the special and up to 50 theatres will debut it in Russia. The celebrations will cross time zones travelling over the equator to New Zealand and Australia where fans will have a choice of 106 cinemas across both countries to view the episode in 3D on the big screen on the 24th November following the simulcast TV broadcast earlier in the morning."

EVENTS IN SPACE AND TIME: MATT SMITH AT THE BFI

The BFI's year-long celebration of fifty years of *Doctor Who* comes to an end on Sunday 8th December with screenings of the Eleventh Doctor's debut episode *The Eleventh Hour* and his third season finale *The Name of the Doctor*. The event will start at 15.45 and will be followed by a Q&A session with guests still to be confirmed. Tickets are due to be made available sometime this month.

The BFI will also be screening *The Day of the Doctor* anniversary episode at the Southbank simultaneously with its TV/cinema broadcast on 23rd November.



SEASON 8 NEWS

With Peter Capaldi, the Twelfth Doctor, having reportedly filmed his first appearance as the Doctor at BBC Wales' Roath Lock Studios on October 3rd, the Matt Smith era finally came to an end when production on the Christmas regeneration episode *The Twelfth Night*, wrapped on 5th October. Doctor Who's departing executive producer Marcus Wilson posted on Twitter: "So it's goodnight from me, and goodnight from him. That's a wrap. Christmas 2013. Thank you all." Where's my hankie?

But brave heart! Intriguing news is already emerging regarding next year's eighth season comprising twelve episodes (including the 2014 Christmas episode) which is due to start filming imminently. Perhaps the most exciting news yet is the confirmation that cult British film director Ben Wheatley (*Kill List*, *Sightseers*, *A Field in England*) is on board to direct the first two episodes of the next season. Wheatley, a long-time fan of the series, recently explained, "I've been watching the current run of Doctor Who with my son and have discovered it all over again. The work that has been done is amazing. I'm really looking forward to working with Peter Capaldi and finding out where Steven Moffat is planning to take the new Doctor."

Skins writer Jack Lothian is already rumoured to be providing a script for the new season and at the recent Manchester Literature Festival Frank Cottrell Boyce, the acclaimed novelist and screenwriter whose credits include *Coronation Street*, *Brookside*, *Millions*, *A Cock and Bull Story*, *24 Hour Party People* (with former Doctor Christopher Eccleston) and the official sequel novel to Ian Fleming's *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* as well as the 'script' for director Danny Boyle's opening ceremony for the 2012 London Olympics confirmed that he is working on a script for a potential *Doctor Who* episode. His latest project, *The Railway Man*, starring Nicole Kidman, Stellan Skarsgård and Colin Firth, is due for release early in 2014. It is not yet known if Boyce, who is said to have been steered in the direction of the *Doctor Who* team by former showrunner Russell T Davies, is writing a script destined for season eight, a later run or if it will ever come to fruition at all. Fingers and toes crossed.

In less encouraging news (unless you're a fan) it appears that some elements from the Matt Smith era may well carry over into his successor's tenure. Actress Neve Mackintosh, who plays comedy lesbian Silurian/Victorian detective Madam Vastra, has confirmed that we'll be seeing more of her and the rest of the so-called 'Paternoster Gang' in the next series. "Steven Moffat's already said that we're definitely going to be in this next series," she said in a recent interview. "It will be sad not to be working with Matt Smith again but I'm really looking forward to Peter Capaldi taking over and seeing what he does with it. We'll be helping the Doctor more but I can't say anything else." Hmmmm...

Meanwhile Alex Kingston, who plays the Doctor's "wife" Professor River Song, has also hinted that there may still be life in her character too. "I look forward to sharing more of River with you in the future but... spoilers!" the actress said recently - and not a little irritatingly - in a BBC America video.



MATT SMITH GOES PSYCHO

Matt Smith's not resting on his laurels or gazing wistfully at his sonic screwdriver following his relinquishment of his starring role in *Doctor Who*. The actor has been cast in the lead role of psychopathic killer Patrick Bateman in a new musical stage production of Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, directed by Rupert Goold, which will play at London's Almeida Theatre from 3rd December 2013 to 25th January 2014 and is already completely sold-out. "The opportunity to work with Rupert Goold, a director of great vision and flair, combined with the brilliant story and music, seemed like such a cool challenge," said Smith recently.



WATCHING DOCTOR WHO

an in-depth look
at the World of
Doctor Who by
JR Southall



Something very interesting is about to happen in *Doctor Who* – and I’m not talking about the anniversary special, the character John Hurt will be playing in it, or even the introduction of Peter Capaldi as the twelfth (or is that thirteenth?) Doctor. Not quite. Specifically, I’m thinking of the Doctor-companion dynamic, and how that dynamic changes when one or other of the characters does. Because when Jenna Coleman’s Clara meets Peter Capaldi’s Doctor for the first time, she will presumably already have done so – while touring the Doctor’s time-lines in *The Name of the Doctor*. And we’ve never had that before; we’ve never had a companion who is already familiar with the future Doctor before she even gets to meet him.

This is something Steven Moffat loves to do, taking the familiar tropes of decades’ worth of *Doctor Who* and giving them his own particular spin. It’s not a million miles removed from the way in which Amy Pond encountered the eleventh Doctor, meeting him first as a child before becoming his companion as an adult. In *The Eleventh Hour*, the grown-up companion had a kind of foreknowledge of the person she was about to travel with, albeit she had of course met him already. The lovely thing about Amy’s introduction was that it brought a fresh perspective to the question of how you repeat the same trope (companion meets Doctor for the first time; or even Doctor meets companion for the first time) without making it simply a

repetition of similar changes we’ve seen countless times over the years.

For all his strengths, Russell T Davies only got this right just the once. Reviving the show in 2005, Davies chose to introduce the new Doctor through the eyes of a companion we’d already had the time to connect with. Unfortunately, he then played the same trick with Freema Agyeman, when we’d already had a year’s worth of acclimatising to David Tennant’s Doctor, and this might be a factor in why the character of Martha ultimately felt an unsuccessful one. By the end of *Smith and Jones* she might well have successfully negotiated the Doctor’s own special audition process, but we really needed to meet her for the first time as he did, in an admittedly delightful little timey-wimey vignette,

rather than the sequence in which she also introduces us to her family. There's a school of thought that suggests the Doctor himself oughtn't to be an identification figure for the audience at home; however when the Doctor is the very human David Tennant, it's hard to avoid such an outcome – and thus it's somewhat stubborn to ignore it.

Donna, on the other hand, had already met the Doctor when she was a guest character in another story, so the decision there was taken out of Davies' hands – which is perhaps for the best.

Davies had also fouled up Rose's introduction to the tenth Doctor, by and large. With Tennant sidelined throughout most of *The Christmas Invasion*, *New Earth* really needed to be a consolidation of their getting to know one another, a proper "meeting" between what were now ostensibly two strangers. Instead it was an insubstantial body-swap comedy, and by the time we reached *Tooth and Claw*, their relationship was fully established (in fact, it appeared to have already established itself by the beginning of Series Two, if the pre-titles sequence in *New Earth* is anything to go by) – and we'd missed seeing that.

The original series very rarely began a new Doctor's tenancy without any previously established characters bridging the changes (in fact, if you count the Brigadier in *Spearhead from Space*, Matt Smith's debut story is the only time this has happened at all in continuing *Doctor Who*, including the very first story – which featured the Doctor's granddaughter as an already constant presence for the character), but this year will therefore be the first time since the relaunch in 2005 that we have had the opportunity to properly explore how that might play out. (ECCLESTON?)



And Steven Moffat has thrown us the aforementioned googlie, by having Clara already aware of any and all the Doctors who ever were or will be but that doesn't necessarily mean that she won't be *meeting* the Peter Capaldi Doctor for the very first time this coming Christmas. Watching his exploits and engaging with the man are two very different things, and I suspect Steven Moffat knows this, and has laid his plans accordingly. After all, the way in which we – and the Doctor – were introduced to Clara was rather extraordinary in itself, and one which in some ways worked almost as a kind of anticipation of what was to come; just as Matt Smith's Doctor has met alternative versions of Clara prior

to meeting the real one for the first time, thus gaining some sort of preconception of the new companion but without really establishing her true character (and more importantly, without establishing how the two characters would "fit" together), so Clara is now in a position whereby she will know *of* the man that is to come, without having interacted with him. The pleasure will be not just in seeing how the companion reacts to a regenerated Doctor, although that's story enough in itself (although after all, we've seen that story countless times already), but also in seeing how she reacts to a man whose personality she's aware of before *he* is. Knowing Steven Moffat's writing, this will be something he'll have no end of fun exploring.

Of course, there's every chance that we've been wrong-footed by the Grand Moff Steven once again, and that none of the above will play out quite how current events seem to predict it will. But if that is indeed the case, it would be even more surprising if Moffat hasn't an even more daring plan for the changeover between Doctors in mind – and something even more interesting for Clara. The forthcoming anniversary special might well furnish us with a few clues as to how all of this will unfold. And then again, it might catch us out by being something entirely unpredictable in an entirely unpredictable way. Or, most likely of all, a combination of both.

As to the question of whether the Twelfth Doctor will need to take on an additional male companion in order to do the running around, it's my impression that Peter Capaldi is quite fit enough to do plenty of that kind of thing himself, if required. Having said that, Steven Moffat *does* seem to enjoy the two companion dynamic, so I'd be surprised if we didn't see one anyway. ✦





DOCTOR WHO - THE COMPLETE SEVENTH SEASON

BD + DVD / Cert: 12 / Director: Various / Screenplay: Steven Moffat, Chris Chibnall, Neil Cross, Neil Gaiman, Mark Gatiss, Toby Whithouse, Stephen Thompson / Starring: Matt Smith, Karen Gillan, Arthur Darvill, Jenna-Louise Coleman, Alex Kingston / Release Date: Out Now

Previously released on DVD/Blu-ray in a haphazard fashion as they were originally screened on TV, the fourteen episodes which purport to be the seventh season of 'new' *Doctor Who* with the stray 2011 Christmas special thrown in for the sake of completion arrive on the best presented DVD/Blu-ray set of the Matt Smith era. The irony, of course, is that the episodes it contains are the scrappiest and most infuriatingly uneven run of episodes since the show returned in 2005. This is *Doctor Who* at its most schizophrenic and undisciplined, a series of stories which try to sell themselves as big, bold 'movie poster' adventures which, in doing so, jettison any pretence at coherent storytelling and pay only lip service to the show's new-found traditions of character development and emotional heart. Season 7 is all over the place but, as is so often the case, there's something for everyone here even if it's not all quite as exciting or successful as we might have hoped or expected.

Kicking off disc one (of five) is the 2011 Christmas special *The Doctor, the Widow and the Wardrobe*, a story so painfully dull, boring and bereft of excitement it's a mystery how the cast and crew

managed to stay awake whilst filming it. Moving swiftly on to season seven itself and we find a string of episodes which are at best patchily enjoyable (apart from Mark Gatiss's gloriously inventive *Crimson Horror* from the tail end of the season) and occasionally right up there with the very worst the series has ever produced. No one needs episodes as irritating or ill-advised as *Dinosaurs on a Spaceship*, *The Rings of Akhaten* or, surprisingly, Neil Gaiman's *Nightmare in Silver* in their lives. Chris Chibnall, now the darling of the chattering classes thanks to *Broadchurch*, redeems himself after the dire dinosaur escapade with the more enjoyable, if no less manic, *Power of Three* that reintroduces the Doctor's UNIT chums but throws away a decent scenario (Earth 'invaded' by black cubes) with a ludicrous and hurried denouement. Mark Gatiss' first script for the season, *Cold War*, successfully brings back classic monsters the Ice Warriors in a story far too rushed to make the most of its base-under-siege scenario (and, drearily, turns the reptilian Ice Warriors into suits of armour for something living inside... Daleks, anyone?).

Frustratingly the whole series is characterised by a lack of real

invention. The 'movie poster' idea just tricks the writers into writing 'movie poster' stories; Toby Whithouse's Western yarn *Town Called Mercy* regurgitates all the familiar Wild West clichés but doesn't do anything interesting with them and Steve Thompson's *Journey to the Centre of the TARDIS* has the audacity to actually resolve itself with a big reset button after forty-odd minutes trudging around dreary TARDIS corridors. Showrunner Steven Moffat's own efforts continue his obsession with rewriting *Doctor Who* lore and refashioning the Doctor's character into something it doesn't need to be. The disappointing *Asylum of the Daleks* ends with the Doctor's oldest enemies forgetting all about him, *The Bells of St John* does nothing new with the interesting idea of aliens invading Earth's wi-fi network and a vague story arc concerning old enemy the Great Intelligence (from the recently recovered 1967 Troughton serial *Web of Fear*) makes little or no sense when it attempts to resolve itself in the bloated, fan boy-pleasing finale *Name of the Doctor*.

The season does, thankfully, finally rid us of the whining Amy Pond (Gillan) and her sappy

husband Rory (Darvill) in *The Angels Take Manhattan* but their 'heartbreaking' finale fails to satisfy as, inevitably, it doesn't make much sense. New girl Clara (Coleman) is a pleasing new presence aboard the TARDIS but once again Moffat has chosen to give her a convoluted and obscure backstory – she's 'The Impossible Girl' (of course she is, Steven... but can't she just be a girl?) whose *raison d'être*, ludicrously, is to be splintered throughout time and retconned into every previous *Doctor Who* adventure. No thanks. Coleman's a chirpy talent but Moffat's inability to write compelling, likeable characters who don't speak in a constant gabble of snarky quips and one-liners renders her pretty much a blank page. The biggest tragedy of this underpowered season, now we know it's Matt Smith's last, is that the young actor never really got the chance to shine and show what he might be really capable of, shackled by the 'madman in a box' persona foisted on him by his showrunner which led him to portray the Doctor as a tiresome hyperactive clown unable to control his own limbs. Smith, a fine actor and a great and enthusiastic ambassador for the show, has been badly served by his time on the series and Season 7 gives him precious little opportunity to shine. But then maybe we've been here before... Season 7 is severely uneven and disappointing stuff and it doesn't bode well for *Doctor Who* as it hits the big 5-0 and gears up for a new era with a new actor but, sadly, the same showrunner...

Extras: Much of the more substantial bonus material is aimed at – and generated by – the American market but there are interesting features on the show's dalliances with America, a Comic Con feature, a Companions feature, all the online prequels and a few entirely disposable – and, in the case of 'Rain Gods', perfectly detestable – 'special' unseen minisodes. Each episode gets a brief 'behind the scenes' snippet and there are handful of commentaries.

Paul Mount

RATING ★★★★★S



DOCTOR WHO - THE ENEMY OF THE WORLD

iTunes / Cert: PG / Director: Barry Letts / Screenplay: David Whitaker / Starring: Patrick Troughton, Frazer Hines, Deborah Watling, Bill Kerr / Release Date: Out Now

There's a moment in Episode 2 of *The Enemy of the World* where, upon mishearing one of the other characters, Patrick Troughton's second Doctor pulls one of those timeless and inimitable faces of his and retorts, "Disused Yeti?!"

His reaction couldn't have been more appropriate. These two newly discovered *Doctor Who* stories have been sitting, disused, on a shelf somewhere in Africa for nigh on forty years. It is an entirely unexpected and welcome pleasure to be able to experience them again. Nine "new old" episodes of Patrick Troughton as the Doctor (and not just as the Doctor) is something to cherish indeed in the series' anniversary year, and Steven Moffat's claim that *Doctor Who* would be "taking over television" has suddenly taken on a whole new meaning.

And what of the two stories?

The Enemy of the World has long been considered an odd fish (by those who've bothered considering it at all), tucked away as it is in the middle of *Doctor Who*'s fifth and so-

called "Monster Season". Even Troughton's dual role as the second Doctor and lead villain Salamander hasn't been enough to raise its profile, and generally speaking it has been thought of as a misstepping James Bond pastiche. While that's not entirely wide of the mark, what's striking about being able to actually watch the story is in how much it resembles the recently defunct historicals that Gerry Davis and Innes Lloyd were so keen to get rid of. The fact that it's written by David Whitaker – the man responsible not just for the scripts of *The Crusade* but who also oversaw such serials as *Marco Polo* and *The Reign of Terror* – means that that oughtn't to have come as a surprise. Hearing the audio and perhaps even watching a reconstruction, we knew *The Enemy of the World* was a carefully plotted, character-driven story, but the visuals – once Episode 1's ostentatiously cinematic film-work is out of the way – nail the story even more tightly to this way of thinking.

It's very much a *Doctor Who* serial about *people*, and Barry Letts, directing in his first brush with the show, assembles an impressive guest cast to oil the wheels of Whitaker's plot. There aren't too many surprises in the performances in the first half of the story, as the previously extant Episode 3 was always a good guide to the characters therein (in spite of it being the story's least representative instalment), but the amount of time Troughton's Doctor spends in the company of Bill

Kerr is pleasing; Kerr creates a very naturalistic Giles Kent and he and Troughton complement one another beautifully. Milton Johns is deliciously oily as Benik and Colin Douglas is a bullish Donald Bruce (whose uncertainty towards the end of the story is played very credibly), and it's wonderful to be able to see more of them. It's also a delight to spend more time in the company of Carmen Munroe and Mary Peach as Fariah and Ferrier (the latter fortunately known by her forename, Astrid, to all involved), two of the more earnest and striking roles in the production – and with audaciously characteristic retro-futuristic costumes to match. Astrid in particular is so very 1968, a typically "strong" female role but in a post-*Avengers* "action woman" sense, yet Munroe steals the early episodes with the honesty and strength she brings to her part. There's a balance between the sincerity in some of the roles and what verges on caricature in others that Letts manages unexpectedly well, and would develop even further when he took charge of the programme.

It's the point midway through Episode 4 when Salamander travels to his secret base that is conversely the moment when the story's plausibility begins to dip, and when the experience of watching it afresh really takes flight. There's no disguising that this plot twist plants *The Enemy of the World* firmly in the territory of the spy thriller for children, and that might well come as a surprise to those who've been brought to the story through Ian Marter's novelization, but this is also where the newly found episodes





of the visuals, it sweeps you along rather than leaving you behind. Very impressive, given the budget and the methods by which 1960s *Doctor Who* was made. It would have been so easy to fluff the story's last episode, but Barry Letts pulls it all off with aplomb.

Letts' direction here is always more than capable, in fact – despite what we might have expected from his subsequent efforts – and keeps *The Enemy of the World* rather lighter on its feet than, for example, previous story *The Ice Warriors*. There's a sense of forward momentum in David

Whitaker's script that makes for a faster-moving six-parter than we've come to expect from other extant 1960s *Doctor Who*. Letts' studio work is punctured by enough extreme close-ups to keep it interesting, while his outdoor filming is expressive and fun, in spite of being shot on a shoestring by comparison with the films it so clearly wants to be. His later stylising of UNIT is clearly evident in the way the beach scenes work in Episode 1, and it's lovely to see just how much location work there is in this first instalment (and lots of fun spotting the back-projection that doubles for outdoors elsewhere, the kind of scenes that Letts would readily use CSO to produce once *Doctor Who* began colour production



two years later). Letts' direction and Whitaker's script also perform a brave and gymnastic balancing act in keeping the "two Troughtons" apart during the hectic studio sequences; in common with most of the period's serials, *The Enemy of the World* was largely recorded "as live" and the costume changes as Troughton switches from one character to the other must have been lightning-quick. The more technically minded will have fun spotting which scenes are parachuted in on film in order to disguise the joins.

Which brings us to the restoration. There are the occasional moments when the soundtrack sounds just the tiniest bit hollow, or the picture wobbles slightly (notably backgrounds shifting behind characters, and most apparently in Episode 2, which must have been in the worst condition), but neither of these things are anything more than almost entirely indistinguishable to the naked senses. And that's a testament to the skills of the restoration team who have worked on these episodes. It might have spent several decades sitting on a shelf in some hot and humid African country, but thanks to the likes of Peter Crocker and Mark Ayres, *The Enemy of the World* looks and sounds just about as good as it must have back in 1967/8. It's also sweet to finally discover that the entire production was shot in 625-line video, rather than just the latter four instalments as had long been suspected the case, and thanks to this Episodes 1 and 2 look just as sharp as the

rest of the story.

Ultimately, the main focus of people watching *The Enemy of the World* will be on Patrick Troughton's performance as the Doctor, and unsurprisingly, Troughton lives up to his reputation. He's just as cherishably instinctive and unpredictable as we might have hoped, his joy in Episode 1 at landing the TARDIS right by the sea is as infectious as the character has ever been – and just as surprising, when he strips right down to his underwear, and does a skip on the beach that pre-empts that famous shot from *The Invasion* – and by Episode 6, the way the actor switches between Doctor, Salamander and Doctor-as-Salamander is astonishing, a performance to truly treasure. We are so lucky to have returned to the archives of the story with two Troughtons for the price of one; this is almost certainly the actor's finest performance in the part.

Beyond that, this isn't quite "classic" *Doctor Who*. It's a story that never entirely engages as a children's version of an adult story type, but it's really not that far from achieving its goals, and it's much faster, much bigger and much more engaging than many other stories of its time. Rather than the forgotten gem of Season 5, the rediscovery of this story will no doubt see it reassessed as one of the jewels in the season's crown.

J R Southall

RATING ★★★★★★ B



Caroline Preece

The Girl From

PLANET
X

Written over two years ago, my first column for Starburst addressed the potential benefits of the *Twilight*-effect, which spawned countless movie and TV copycats, for the diversity of geek culture. I asked why we should only be allowed to enjoy certain types of movie, book or television show, with female-targeted products almost automatically derided as somehow silly or inferior. My strong feelings on this were where the idea for writing *Girl from Planet X* came from in the first place, and the matter is still very much up for discussion in 2013.

Before you stop reading, I also acknowledged the poor quality of the *Twilight* books and movies, before the films had even been completed, but would never criticise anyone who chooses to watch and read them. Now, however, something very strange is happening to YA fiction on-screen. *Twilight* has finished, and 2013 has seen a slew of pretenders hyped by PRs and advertisers and then subsequently ignored by critics and audiences, all trying to cash in on the riches accrued by *Twilight* over the course of four books and five movies. The only book series to inspire the same furore since has, of course, been *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

In 2012, however, one film did catch everyone's attention – *The Hunger Games*. Looking back over this period of cinematic

history, two of the things that will be most clear to film historians will likely be superheroes and YA fantasy romance. Never has fantasy and science fiction been so accepted by the mass as to bleed into every summer and winter release of the year and, sooner or later, something interesting was bound to cut through the white noise of mediocrity. In the YA world, it was Katniss Everdeen and her fight for revolution that rose to the top of the pile, ushering in a new stage in the genre's evolution.

This November, *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* hits cinemas, and the appetite for more doesn't seem to have dissipated over the last twelve months. Why is this? When so many have failed to capture any sort of love from audiences or critics (the most exciting YA release so far this year was *One Direction: This is Us*), why is this one so special? Though tempting, we can't even attribute it to quality. The sheer, extended indifference of the target audience to anything else is something that rarely happens in entertainment, and executives must currently be wracking their brains for some information about that lucrative audience quadrant – the elusive teenage girl. They're currently having a moment, and the formula hasn't yet been figured out.

Critics and geek audiences weren't exactly enamoured by Stephanie Meyer's



fantasy romance series, but at least they were talking about it. It sparked a debate that, while it inspired the worst kind of hate from certain deplorable factions, had two clear and passionate sides to it. With films like *Beautiful Creatures*, *The Host* and *Mortal Instruments*, it was clear from the get go that no one really cared. They received pretty limited releases and exited the cinemas after a couple of weeks. This isn't just critics creating the narrative as they did with *Twilight*, it was the audience who weren't bothering to turn up.

No one doubts that *Catching Fire*, meanwhile, will once again be a huge mega-hit, and pave the way for two more movies to follow, but it's only been a couple of months since *The Mortal Instruments: City of Bones* failed so spectacularly. It's becoming clear that fantasy-romance no longer interests that target audience, and has arguably never particularly interested some of the older people that enjoy these films, and new movies will have to distance themselves from it as much as possible. *Beautiful Creatures* may have been the best film currently sitting on the rubbish pile – switching the love story dynamic around – but it was so heavily advertised as a *Twilight* rip-off that it never really stood a chance.

The 'love triangle' between Katniss, Peeta and Gale was played up a little before the film was released, but positive buzz about the books managed to drown out the naysayers. It was different enough from vampires and werewolves to pique interest and, once people



THIS MONTH

HOW THE HUNGER GAMES TOOK OVER Y.A. CINEMA

saw the film, it was abundantly clear that this wasn't just another cheap fantasy romance designed to numb the brains of forgiving teenage audiences – it was a proper science-fiction tale that just happened to star a female character. She didn't have to marry or become a mother to get tough, she was tough because she had to survive, and had better things to do than gaze into her boyfriend's dreamy eyes film after film.

And herein lies its success, in my opinion. As soon as YA adaptations stop insulting their audience's intelligence, there might be a few more success stories. *The Hunger Games* told a good, compelling story first and foremost, giving its target market (still teenage girls) a heroine they could really get behind, and they created a film that anyone could enjoy. So many people don't give a snuff about who the main character is in love with at any one time and, with *Hunger Games*, they can now sit back and enjoy a film that tells an actual story with well-written, compelling characters.

I realise that this element comes largely from the books, but it must also be acknowledged that the films could easily have become dreary stories about forbidden love if someone had wanted them to. Gale's role – going to rising hunk and semi-celebrity Liam Hemsworth – could have been bulked up and Katniss' inner struggle could have been whether to snog Peeta or save herself for her childhood sweetheart. If this had been the film we were delivered, I have no doubt it would have failed. Instead, this was a story about a young girl rising against an oppressive government, and absolutely anyone can get behind that.

I'm consistently against anyone who criticises female geeks for liking things actually aimed at them, and even more against them being called fakes because of it, but I also realise that the argument against substandard movies like *Twilight* has a lot of merit to it. We should all, then, celebrate *The Hunger Games* for what it represents. Just by being better, more intelligent and better made, these films automatically point out the inherent flaws of other movies in the same niche genre, resigning them to the dump before anyone can commit them to the collective memory. They'll be forgotten, and Katniss will be remembered. They might not even be bad movies, but they indicate an attitude that

shouldn't, and isn't, being tolerated.

In the wake of *Twilight*, studios got complacent churning out the same product in slightly different packaging and assuming an audience would find them. They underestimated their audience, and misunderstood what people liked about the genre in the first place, and they're now being punished for this cynical business model. Fangirls are big business, but they're also a force of nature that seems to be creating trends more than they're mindlessly attaching to the latest 'big thing'. *The Hunger Games* was a relatively big risk when it was released, and people responded to that risk. It wasn't someone cynically trawling the bestseller shelves for something similar, and that showed.

We're still waiting on *Divergent* in 2014, starring Shailene Woodley as a girl fighting against a regime in a dystopian future, which clearly thinks it can be the next *Hunger Games*. It proves that little, if anything, has yet been learned from the past year's YA releases, and I predict similar failure. I could

be wrong about that but, as long as the film is half-decent, I'd be happy to be mistaken. At least these characters are strong and resilient, and will hopefully give YA movies a better reputation, but there's always the chance that they'll just solidify the worst of what people already assume about them.

If Hollywood never made assumptions about what we wanted to see, then nothing would get made but, when the assumption is that certain audiences will watch absolutely anything they're given, that's not a good thing. *The Hunger Games* is an anomaly, and the inevitable pretenders are going to be coming until the next anomaly arrives. For now, I'm thankful that there's a female-targeted movie franchise out there that not only appeals to people outside of the desired demographic, but that also offers young girls something good to get behind. The failure of movies like *The Host* and *Beautiful Creatures* is a win for that audience, because they refused to be dictated to by Hollywood executives, and they're the people I want to sit and watch *Catching Fire* with. ✦



SPIDERS AND DRAGONS AND ELVES, OH MY!

OR: WHAT WE'LL SEE IN THE HOBBIT THE DESOLATION OF SMAUG BY KATE FATHERS

Since the release of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, fans haven't been short on news. Instead of leaving the second film in as much darkness as a novel adaptation can reside in, Peter Jackson provided us with a wealth of information. From production diaries to sneak peeks to two trailers, Jackson has given us a pretty decent idea of where Bilbo's adventures are headed — and where he'll deviate from Tolkien's work.

Here there be spoilers...

When we last left Thorin and Company (at the end of Chapter 6) they had narrowly avoided fiery, warg-nibbled death and were deposited by the eagles at the edge of Mirkwood. This leads them to the film's first new character: Beorn (Mikael Persbrandt), a shapeshifter who offers up his home to the Company and who bears a striking resemblance to Sonic the Hedgehog. Contrary to the novel, shenanigans look to ensue with the Company attempting to ward off an

angry bear, but shortly thereafter the novel and film appear to join up again with Gandalf leaving the dwarves just outside of Mirkwood. In the novel, which is written largely from Bilbo's perspective, this is the last we see of Gandalf until Chapter 17. His adventures (that is, throwing the Necromancer out of Dol Guldur with the White Council) are related only after they occur, and their significance to the overarching plot of the War of the Ring is only alluded to in the Appendices. This doesn't work on film, and consequently we the audience will see Gandalf join Radagast in exploring Dol Guldur.

It's when the Company enters Mirkwood that we start to see the biggest novel deviations, and it's also where Jackson continues to contrast a peaceful Middle-earth with a Middle-earth under Sauron, foreshadowing the events of *The Lord of the Rings*. Mirkwood itself is representative of this contrast. It began as Greenwood the Great, its name changing as the Necromancer's infection spread and gave rise to giant, dwarf-craving





spiders. Pockets of its former glory are found in the butterflies Bilbo encounters above the treetops, and in the halls of the Wood Elves, which are bright and warm serving as a visual contrast to the dark, predominantly nighttime wanderings of the Company through the forest. The conflicting nature of Mirkwood is also seen through its elven inhabitants, who we meet shortly after Bilbo rescues the dwarves from the spiders.

Instead of waiting for their parties to be interrupted, the film elves capture the dwarves when they're still in the spiders' nest and march them to the halls of the Elvenking Thranduil (Lee Pace). The elves doing the escorting include Legolas (Orlando Bloom) and the Jackson-created Tauriel (Evangeline Lilly), the former of whom did not appear in *The Hobbit* by virtue of not having been created until after its publication. Like Gandalf, Legolas provides a link to *The Lord of the Rings*, not just by being present but also through his character arc. The Wood Elves are isolationists, but with Mirkwood and the wider world darkening, Legolas starts to question whether or not he should keep to that policy. According to the back of his action figure, this puts Legolas in direct conflict with his father, Thranduil, who has already displayed a penchant for non-interference in the first film. And intriguingly, Thranduil's rationale has less to do with racial tensions than you might think.

Despite being a named, dialogue-bearing character in *The Hobbit*, not much is divulged about Thranduil, his history or his people. This can be found in *The Unfinished Tales*, which Jackson doesn't have the rights to, but it looks to me like Jackson will be alluding to it

and working with it as much as he can. Thranduil was part of the Last Alliance, along with his father (the king at the time) Oropher. "Oropher was slain in the first assault on Mordor", *The Unfinished Tales* says, and when the war was over Thranduil returned home as king with only a third of his army.

"But there was in Thranduil's heart a still deeper shadow. He had seen the horrors of Mordor and could not forget. If ever he looked south its memory dimmed the light of the Sun, and though he knew it was now broken and deserted and under the vigilance of the Kings of Men, fear spoke in his heart that it was not conquered forever: it would arise again."

Thranduil's paranoia, his unwillingness to risk his people in helping the dwarves during Smaug's takeover of Erebor, and the brief moment we have of him in the second trailer warning Tauriel against giving Legolas what must be hope of Middle-earth's survival, is consequently not only completely justified but utterly fascinating. Like Mirkwood, Thranduil is in constant conflict; he isn't living in a complacent peace, but neither is he rising to meet the negative changes to his world. This struggle is challenged by both Legolas and Tauriel, and could very well foreshadow Thranduil's later involvement during the War of the Ring (see: Appendix B, *The Return of the King*). It will also provide motive for Legolas choosing to join the Fellowship in the first *The Lord of the Rings* film.

Tauriel appears to serve as a foil to both Legolas and Thranduil, a position that we're sure many Tolkien fans find relieving given the fear that she would be nothing but a shoehorned love interest (Jackson





himself has confirmed that she has “no romantic connection to Legolas”). Tauriel is both an answer to the sad lack of female presence in *The Hobbit* (there are no named, speaking female characters) and the lack of optimism displayed by other characters. Like Aragorn before her, Tauriel believes that Middle-earth is worth fighting for, and that helping others for the greater good is more important than staying safe. As she is a new character, besides questioning authority we’re not sure what else will happen to her, which is quite refreshing given that we book fans will have very few surprises.

The dwarves escape the Elvenking with Bilbo’s help after at least two weeks. In that time Bilbo wandered around Thranduil’s halls, invisible due to the One Ring, stealing food and observing and looking for an opening to free his friends. When he does he smuggles the dwarves down a rapid-filled river in wine barrels to the Long Lake. Instead of encountering the Raft Elves, the Company meet Bard the Bowman (Luke Evans), heir to the lordship of Dale who is making an earlier appearance than he did in the novel. He takes them to Lake-town, a crannog-like settlement that is overseen by the Master (Stephen Fry)—no, not that one. Despite being slimy and avaricious, the Master feeds and clothes Bilbo and the dwarves and furnishes them with supplies. Bard, it seems, might be the only one to have doubts and takes issue with Thorin’s quest. “Dragon fire and ruin,” Bard says in the second trailer, is all that they can hope for if Thorin continues, not that anyone listens to him. It also looks like we might see more of the Master in the film than we did in the novel. Given Bard’s presence this might mean more conflict between the two of them, as Bard could eject the Master from his position given his lordly heritage or could ditch him in Lake-town alone if Dale is made available by Erebor’s liberation.

Then, after sailing up the Running River and hiking past the ruins of Dale, the company arrives at the Lonely Mountain. This is an incredibly emotional moment for the dwarves, and Jackson is going to take full advantage of that. We also see the continuation of the contrasting Middle-earth realms, particularly in Erebor and Dale which we saw in full bloom during the prologue of *The Unexpected Journey* and are now, in *The Desolation of Smaug*, ruinous and weed-choked and dark. As we learnt in the first film it’s likely that

Smaug would align himself with Sauron given the opportunity, and so Erebor and Dale, like Mirkwood, give us a taste of what Middle-earth would be like under darkness. In this way *The Hobbit* serves as the perfect primer for *The Lord of the Rings*. It’s the War of the Ring on a much smaller scale, and particularly in Jackson’s film universe it will serve both the audience and characters like Gandalf and Legolas as foreshadowing for larger danger.

And speaking of danger, Erebor meets a dragon and a dragon meets our titular character: Smaug (Benedict Cumberbatch). Smaug’s scenes have been shrouded in secrecy, the footage we’ve been privy to thus far is limited (mostly to flames) and the production stills concerning Bilbo only. Jackson wants his audience to be as overwhelmed by Smaug as Bilbo is, and we fully believe we will be. As for the scenes themselves, I think that Bilbo’s scenes with Smaug (Chapter 12) will be largely untouched; perhaps there will be slight dialogue changes for verbal fluidity, but otherwise Bilbo will be cleverly attempting to avoid a fiery death and Smaug will be unimpressed. After they part ways it appears that the action picks up, more so than in the novel, with flame rocketing through Erebor and Thorin doing an ill thought-out impersonation of Disney’s *Pocahontas*. With no intruders discovered, Smaug leaves for Lake-town and the dwarves get their first look at their treasure, which includes a mithril coat we viewers will be very familiar with.

In the novel, after freeing the dwarves from the Mirkwood spiders and divulging his possession of the One Ring, Bilbo earns the dwarves’ trust, which he continues to build on by helping them escape the Elvenking and then fulfilling his post as Erebor burglar. By the end of *The Unexpected Journey* it looked like Bilbo was well on his way to being accepted by all thirteen of his companions, but if the second *The Desolation of Smaug* trailer is anything to go by, it seems that Thorin is still a bit cold on Bilbo. We’re not entirely sure why Jackson is prolonging this narrative tension; maybe he is using it to explain the position Bilbo takes during the Battle of Five Armies, or perhaps Bilbo sympathised with the elves, to Thorin’s disapproval. Regardless it looks like the Company will be just as harmonious as they were in the first film, although mostly orc-free.

As for the orcs, Azog, Thorin’s

nemesis who was resurrected from the novel's list of the dead, is still on the loose in the second film. He and others have been seen in the trailers terrorizing elves, and his son Bolg (Conan Stevens) is reported to be among them. In the novel Bolg appears only during the Battle of Five Armies, bringing with him a revenge plot as Azog was killed by Dain Ironfoot (a cousin of Thorin) in the Battle of Azanulbizar outside Moria. Seeing as the film Azog is alive and has his own revenge plot with Thorin, Bolg is likely to have a smaller, subordinate role. While the orcs won't meet the dwarves again until the final film, what they will do is act as another representation of Middle-earth's spreading darkness, moving through Mirkwood to Lake-town and then, finally, to Erebor. Azog and Bolg will also contribute to a second theme: the relationship between fathers and sons. Family history is extremely important in Tolkien's Middle-earth universe, as it was in the medieval writings that inspired them. Before the use of surnames, people were identified in relation to their parents, specifically their father, which we see often in Middle-earth (for example, it's always Aragorn son of Arathorn, not Aragorn son of

Gilraen). The identity and position of your father was reflected on yourself, and often so were their ideals, which as mentioned earlier we'll see challenged with Thranduil and Legolas. Thorin and his father Thrain will be explored; Bard and his son Bain (John Bell); and Azog and Bolg, probably with regards to revenge on the dwarves. This will show us the similarities between different races (even orcs can have familial relationships), and also contribute to the dichotomy we will already see in the film. Differences in opinions, generations and experiences are likely to be highlighted.

The film draws to a close in Chapter 14, with Smaug's attack on Lake-town and subsequent death at the hands of Bard. It might not seem like there is a lot left for the final film, but news quickly spreads through the forest and across mountains of Smaug's defeat and the freeing of Erebor and its gold, to elves and dwarves and all the way to Beorn's home. Slowly they start marching towards the Lonely Mountain, and the final confrontation.



THE HOBBIT: THE DESOLATION OF SMAUG opens in UK cinemas December 13th.



The Gore Father

GEORGE A. ROMERO INTERVIEW

WORDS
MARTYN CONTERIO

NOT MANY FILMMAKERS CAN CLAIM TO HAVE HELPED INSTIGATE AN ENTIRE SUBGENRE OF HORROR. GEORGE A. ROMERO, HOWEVER, CAN BOAST SUCH A DISTINCTION. FROM CULT CURIOSITY TO PRIME-TIME TELEVISION, ONE THING IS FOR SURE: THE FLESH-EATING HORDES HAVE COME A VERY LONG WAY. IT ALL STARTED WITH A HUMBLE B-MOVIE MADE BY A GROUP OUT IN PITTSBURGH, PA. THE NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD (1968) IS A TRUE LANDMARK IN HORROR CINEMA.

AS WELL AS BLAZING A TRAIL FOR THE WALKING DEAD, ROMERO HAS WORKED IN A HANDFUL OF OTHER GENRES: FROM VAMPIRE MOVIES (MARTIN, 1976) TO BIKER FLICKS (KNIGHTRIDERS, 1981). IN THE EARLY 1980S, ROMERO TEAMED UP WITH AUTHOR STEPHEN KING TO MAKE AN ANTHOLOGY PICTURE BASED ON EC COMICS' OUTPUT. CREEPSHOW (1982) BECAME ONE OF THE DIRECTOR'S BIGGEST BOX-OFFICE HITS AND HAS RECENTLY BEEN RE-RELEASED ON BLU-RAY. WE CAUGHT UP WITH THE GENRE LEGEND TO TALK ABOUT THE FILM, HIS CAREER, AND MORE...

Starburst: Can you tell us about EC Comics and its reputation back in the 1950s?

George A. Romero: I don't know exactly what happened and what all the politics were, but I know there was a Comics Code that eventually changed the degree of, I guess, violence. It was sort of like a decency code that changed a lot of these comic books that were pretty bawdy or violent. The horror stories were tamed down.

Were these comics a lot more violent than movies at that time?

I guess they got after them for all the blood and gore and more adult scenes that were in them. I never found them in anyway offensive at that age, where I wasn't going to be offended by much. It all changed and I stopped reading them, even Mad magazine, which used to be a comic-book format. But I wasn't really aware at that time what all the politics were.

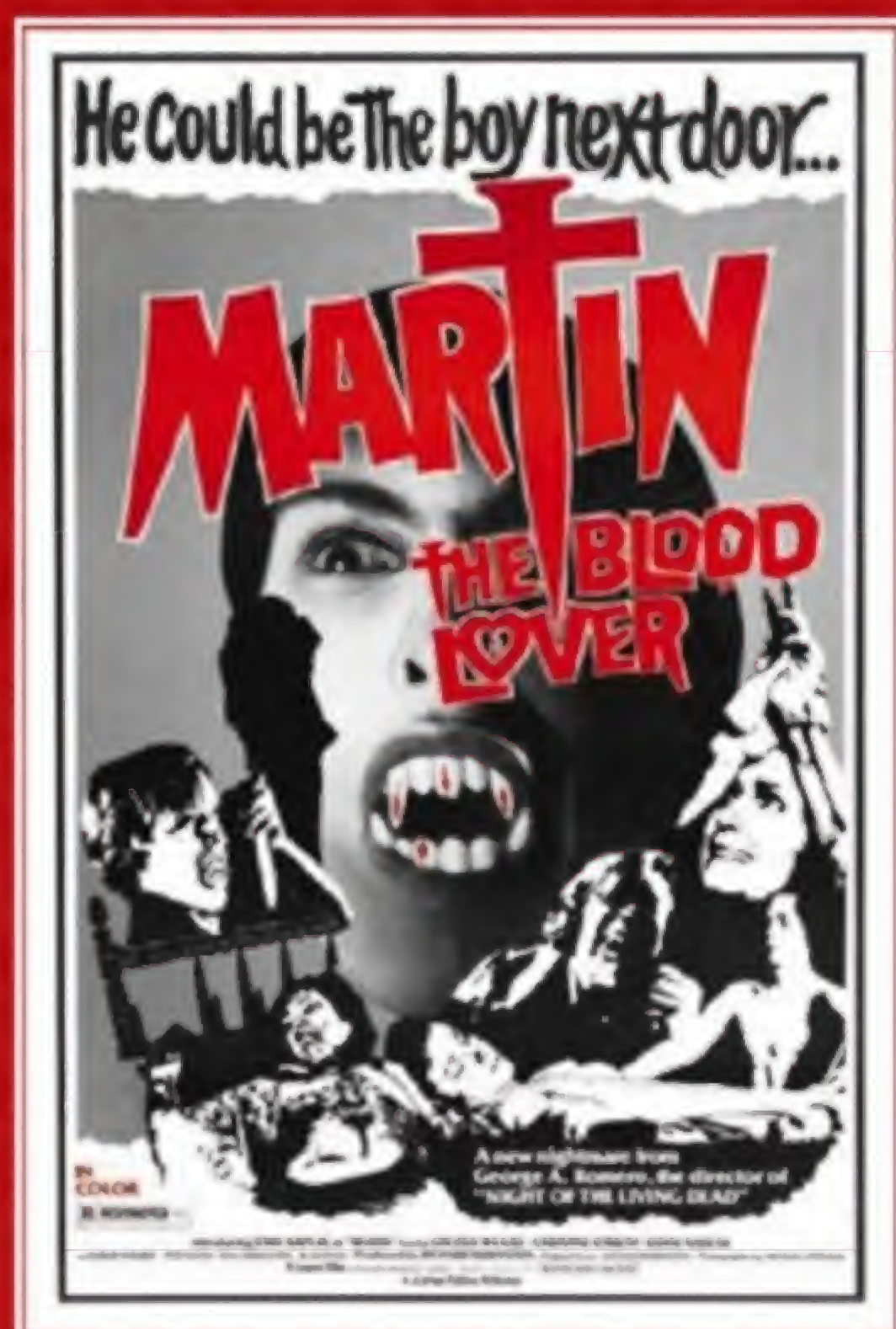
For Creepshow you teamed up with Stephen King, an author at the height of his popularity in the early 1980s. How did that come about?

Steve King and I, as long as we'd known each other, would talk about movies and the old EC comics. Steve bought me some original panels and a couple of books. I had a couple of original Jack Davis paintings and so we were sitting around and decided to do *Creepshow*. Steve, basically, wanted to do a homage to those EC books. He thought an anthology [format] would be perfect for it. The script came in within three weeks. And that was it.

How did you actually meet Stephen King and then form this working relationship?

I think it was after *Carrie* (1976). I think *Carrie* was still in production or hadn't been released. I don't know, I don't remember when it was, but I had a film called *Martin* play at Utah. Before Sundance it was called the USA Film Festival, I think, and a group from Warner Bros. saw my film and they had





just purchased the rights to *Salem's Lot*, one of Steve's novels. They approached me and said – this is in typical Hollywood fashion – “You made a film about a vampire in a small town and Steve just wrote a book about a vampire in a small town. We should get you guys together!” That’s what happened. Warner Bros. flew me up to Maine and I hung out with Steve for three days. Ever since then, we’ve been friends.

Martin is one of your best, for sure. Your zombie movies have had a massive influence on the genre but I think Martin, too, has had an impact on indie vampire flicks. Had you ever considered it in such a regard?
I didn’t. In fact, how did it have a huge influence? I can’t imagine.

It’s that contemporary psychological, existentialist angst factor and removing it of overt fantastical trappings... but playing with iconography. I saw a movie by Shunji Iwai, called *Vampire*, and that seemed a spiritual bedfellow of your film, *Martin*.

I don’t really watch them... so I don’t know if it’s been influential. I don’t think *Martin* was a vampire at all. I guess I just never thought of it before that way. It’s my favourite film of mine, but never thought of it influencing the vampire genre.

Anyway, back to *Creepshow*. Have you heard anything about Warner Bros. planning a reboot? I know there was *Creepshow 3*, but like, a proper remake. Didn’t they do one? I thought they’d made one. Again, I don’t know. I don’t keep my ear to the track that way. I did *Creepshow 2*. I wrote it, I didn’t direct it. Steve wrote the stories and I wrote the screenplay. That’s the only involvement we had with it. I had heard

they’d made a *Creepshow* remake. I never saw it. But I wouldn’t be surprised if they tried to do it. Richard [Rubinstein], my ex-producing partner, has been going around willy-nilly, selling off the rights. *Day [of the Dead]* has been remade twice and I know they’re planning on doing another one.

Oh, god.

They’ve been trying desperately to get me involved but I keep saying no. I already did that [movie]. There’s talk about taking my original script for *Day of the Dead*. I needed more money [at the time], so I had to cut it back for budgetary reasons. And now there’s talk about making that script. I just don’t want to be involved.

Would you ever revisit any of your films and remake it yourself?

The only film I’d like to revisit is one I did called *Jack’s Wife* (1972). I think the title on DVD is *Hungry Wives*. I’d really like to redo that. We ran out of money and we had to hurry up and finish the film. It’s pretty flawed and I’d like to change the character a little bit. That’s the only one I’ve ever thought: ‘I want to revisit this’.

Is the fact your zombie films have been remade a sign of your cultural legacy or just lazy producers chasing a buck?

As far as I can see, that’s what it is. It’s a little misguided because the originals didn’t make any money. It’s not like the *Halloween* franchise, you know. *Dawn of the Dead*, for example, I really think *Dawn of the Dead* – Zack Snyder’s film – started the rebirth of the zombies in cinema. It was the first one that went out and made about \$35 million. I think that might have been the beginning of the new zombie trend. I didn’t see the reason for remaking it. When we made the film, we were talking about consumerism. We shot it in the first shopping mall we’d ever seen and this was a new thing. Now, there’re shopping malls everywhere.

Do you think there’s anything left for the zombie genre to tell us about our culture, society, or are they running on empty?

I think they are. Max Brooks was really disappointed with *World War Z*. I didn’t think very much of *Z* until I saw *Man of Steel*; then *Z* started to look like a work of genius.

What about yourself?

I don’t know where to go with it. People have tried humour, this and that... I don’t know. I used to be the only guy doing it and using it [the zombie figure] differently. I’d wait for something to happen politically and in the world and try to make a movie about that. My films are about the humans. The zombies in my films are the annoyance... the films are more about human foibles and misbehaviour and mistakes. I don’t know where to go. I am working on something. I’ve finished a screenplay based on a novel called *The Zombie Autopsies* [by Steven C.

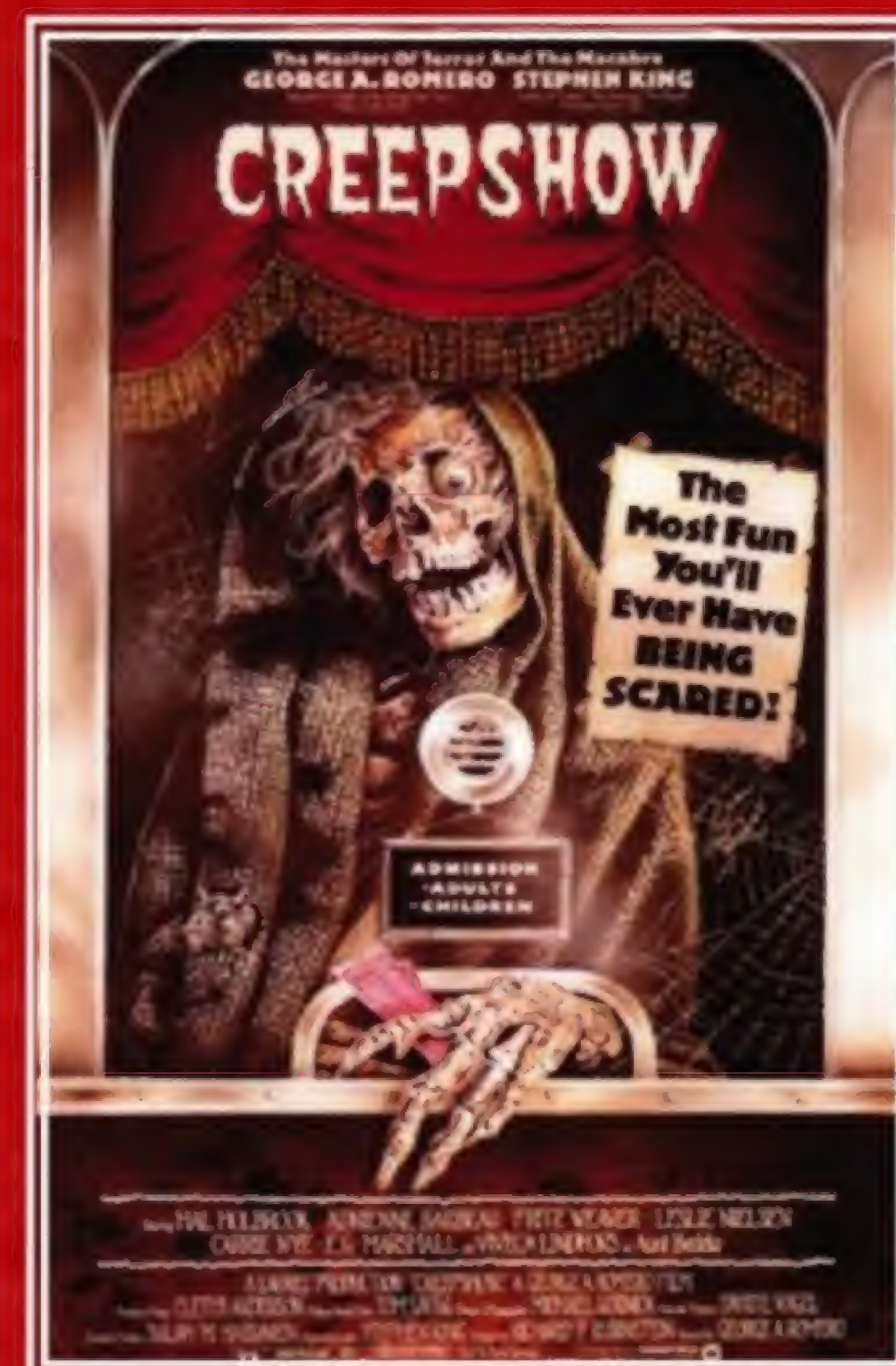
“I DIDN’T THINK VERY MUCH OF WORLD WAR Z UNTIL I SAW MAN OF STEEL; THEN Z STARTED TO LOOK LIKE A WORK OF GENIUS.”

Schlozman]. It’s a very smart and realistic look at... not zombies... it was written by a Harvard doctor and really explains a set of conditions that create something that looks like a zombie. That’s something I’m trying, but I don’t know if I’ll ever find the financing for it.

If you never made another zombie film again, are you happy with the ones you’ve done?

Yes, very much so. I think I’d like to reshuffle the deck. They did a version of *The Godfather* – the first two *Godfather* films – and they put them in consecutive order. I’d like to take my films and shuffle them. Take *Diary of the Dead* and *Survival of the Dead* and shuffle them in. *Land of the Dead* would be the end. I wouldn’t mind doing that, as an experiment.

Second Sight’s new edition of CREEPSHOW is available now on Blu-ray.





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Starburst Magazine

JINGLE ALL THE WAY

A STARBURST CHRISTMAS VIEWING GUIDE

Ho-ho-holy moley, how horrible is Christmas TV?! Well, not to worry because the Starburst team is on hand to recommend you enough holiday-themed genre classics and curios to ensure you needn't suffer through a single Only Fools and Horses repeat...

BATMAN RETURNS (1992)

Where Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* adaptation was surprisingly straight (for a Burton feature) the inevitable sequel was vastly improved by allowing the filmmaker to indulge the eccentricities for which we all know and love him; namely a streak of black humour, Circus freaks and Christmas. *Iron Man 3* and *Jingle all the Way* aside, *Batman Returns* is one of the few Christmas themed superhero movies we've ever really had. And the world's Christmas viewing is a much better place for *Batman Returns* being in it. Sure, it has Michael Keaton's odd Batman doing some truly un-Batman like things (namely, strapping a bomb to a giant circus goon, then grinning as he punches him to his certain, explosive doom down a sewer) but it also happens to have some of the best imagery and

writing we've ever seen in a *Batman* film. Yes, even yours, Nolan. Superhero films don't get much more Christmassy than the Penguin lobbing an umbrella full of bats ("lawn dart!") at a kidnapped Beauty Queen, thereby causing her to drop from a skyscraper rooftop onto a giant Christmas tree, framing Batboob in the process. The snowy, cold Gotham City is reminiscent of German expressionism, also evident in Christopher Walken's magnificent Max Shreck (Gotham's own Santa Claus), creating an atmosphere in which the rubber-suited, short and weird Batman feels like the most natural thing of all. "Mistletoe can be deadly if you eat it," sultry Selina Kyle whispers to Wayne at Shreck's masquerade ball. "But a kiss can be deadlier if you mean it," Bruce replies, topping a festive embrace that the too

on-the-nose "storm is coming, Mr. Wayne" speech of *The Dark Knight Rises* never had a chance of beating. It's a more personal film than Burton's *Batman*, full of heart, imagination and grotesque comedy-horror. As oversized presents, festive trees, snow and a Christmas-shopping Alfred populate the streets of Gotham, we're left with the very best kind of Christmas film - one which it's acceptable to watch all year around. For this writer and Batfan's money, *Batman Returns* is not only the best Christmas film of all time, but the best *Batman* film ever, too. Every bit the Christmas film we've spent all this time arguing that it is, it closes with the same festive sentiments as it opens; a Christmas wish from Bruce to Alfred... "Merry Christmas, Alfred. Goodwill to all men... and women." | JH





LOST IN SPACE – SEASON 1, EPISODE 15: 'RETURN FROM OUTER SPACE' (1965)

In an earlier episode, visiting aliens called the Taureans had left some of their technology behind on the planet on which the Robinson family are stranded. As this adventure begins, failed assassin/master spy turned childminder Dr Zachary Smith, young Will and Penny Robinson and the Robot stumble upon one of the gadgets they had left behind. It seems that the machine is a matter transfer device. Despite being sternly warned by Prof. John Robinson to leave the thing alone, the headstrong Will decides to aim the transporter toward Earth and beam himself here seeking rescue. (Hang on, if they're lost, how does he know where to point it?!) Anyhow, the beam takes him to a snowy town in Vermont at Christmas which, despite the series being set in 1997, still looks like 1965. Will needs to phone Alpha Control for help but naturally nobody believes him because the Robinsons are believed dead and the well meaning townsfolk plan on sending him to a children's home. Luckily, the little tyke makes it back to the beam in time to return to his family just before his father and co-pilot Don West destroy the machine forever. | RP



A NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS (1993)

Created by Tim Burton as a horror movie suitable for small children, *A Nightmare Before Christmas* is a perfect antidote for those who need to switch off from the holiday without wanting to disconnect entirely. This quirky stop-motion animation is still as charming as it was twenty years ago, with its quirky little ditties and utterly bonkers plot. The idea that the King of Halloween can hijack Christmas should cheer up anyone who prefers pumpkins to gawdy baubles on trees, and the movie is filled with brilliant little moments, from Jack Skellington's coffin sleigh to the looks on children's faces when they realise that something has gone terribly wrong with Santa's special day. | EF

LOIS & CLARK – SEASON 4, EPISODE 11: T'WAS THE NIGHT BEFORE MXYMAS (1996)

Lois & Clark probably divides Superman fans as much as this summer's *Man of Steel* did and it's fair to say that the show had a patchy run at best, from a great first season to a mostly good second to a "meh" third to the mostly poor fourth. But hidden away in that fourth season is one of the best episodes in the entire series. It's an episode that showcases what the show did best - wholesome family fun with a pretty heavy dose of cheese piled on top. The story sees Mr Mxyzptlk torment Clark/Superman by making him relive Christmas Eve over and over again, with humanity's hope slowly disappearing each time he relives it. It's one of the show's better uses of a villain from the comics and builds a story around him that allows Howie Mandel to have a lot of fun with the part (even if he looks nothing like his comic book counterpart) as he watches Clark try to figure out how to break the loop and save the world using his brains rather than his powers. It may not be to everyone's taste, but it's a great Christmas gift for fans of the show! | SM



BRAZIL (1985)

Sam Lowry (Jonathan Pryce), a mere governmental pawn in a bureaucracy-obsessed dystopia, escapes his tedious life to literally follow the girl of his dreams. Terry Gilliam's Orwellian masterpiece is far from the mould of your typical 'Christmas film', but nevertheless is set against a festive backdrop. Near the beginning, we see a typical family home. "How can Santa visit if we don't have a chimney?" ask the children, before the ceiling is blown open by armed police, who abseil in to the sound of sleigh bells, take Daddy away in a sack and issue Mum with a receipt. Merry Christmas, kids! A later festive highlight comes when Sam is due to be interrogated – and this isn't going to be the nice kind of interrogation – when in walks a man dressed as Santa. Ho-ho-ho! With a tone critical of consumerism running throughout, it's a complex, dark, and sadly relevant film about how, really, it isn't a wonderful life. | KM





THUNDERBIRDS – SERIES 2, EPISODE 6: 'GIVE OR TAKE A MILLION' (1966)

As Thunderbirds wound up its 32-episode run, it went out with not so much a bang, but a jingle of sleigh bells with a seasonal episode without a single rescue or a hazardous mission. It's Christmas on Tracy Island in the year 2026, and sitting with patriarch Jeff Tracy dressed as Santa Claus is a small boy, who is anxiously awaiting his treat. His treat is that he gets to watch a Thunderbird of his choice be launched. His choice is Thunderbird 3. But how did he get there? The story is told in flashback... A department store has an elaborate publicity stunt, to drop toys at a children's home on Christmas day using a rocket. Unfortunately, the building happens to be located next to a bank, allowing a couple of unscrupulous crooks to dig their way from the store to the vault and make away with gold bullion using the gift-laden rocket to escape. Happily it all goes wrong for the robbing gits - they're both knocked unconscious by the gravity change and are arrested upon landing. As for the rocket's other cargo, one of the parcels contains an invitation to Tracy Island, with Virgil ready to take the lucky recipient for the Christmas of his dreams! | RP

In its entire six-season run, *The Dead Zone* only ever attempted a Christmas episode once. Given that it was an adaptation/expansion of Stephen King's novel, tonally there wasn't really much room for a feel good Christmas story. But, in its fourth season, *The Dead Zone* turned its back on the darker stuff and embraced its goofy side for a fun bubble episode. The episode sees fellow psychic Alex Sinclair surprise Johnny with a Christmas visit that, following a shared vision, sees them help out an amnesiac Santa and the three kids that stole from him. Yes it's corny and yes they lay it on a little thick at times but, if we're being honest, aren't we all looking for a little bit of that dumb, feel-good fluff at this time of year? | SM



GREMLINS (1984)

Joe Dante's 1984 film is an absolute classic, and is often seen by a certain generation as *the* Christmas movie. And who amongst said generation never wanted a Mogwai of their own when they were younger? Hell, even now we'd all take one. The fantastically magical, festive tale could just about be deemed kid friendly, despite its certification, and there was also plenty for adults to sink their teeth into. Cute, friendly 'monster' spawns multiple crazed miniature bastards? What's not to love! | AP



SANTA'S SLAY (2005)

A thousand years ago, the son of Satan lost a curling match to an angel, requiring him to spend every year of the next millennium spreading joy to the hearts of children. He despised every minute of it. Now his time of servitude is over and he has centuries of chaos to catch up on. "He's making a list..." promises the tagline, "pray you're not on it." The demonic butcher brings his bison-hauled sleigh to the township of Hell (yes, seriously), and goes on a murderous rampage, with death by candy cane shank, bauble smoke bomb, exploding present, burning coal incendiary, wreath strangulation, eggnog drowning, turkey leg suffocation, menorah impalement and a Christmas tree star used as a makeshift shuriken. The punning title is only the first of a number of endearingly bad jokes, such as the Global Operations Network for Aerospace Defence (acronym), and lines like "Who's your daddy? Father Christmas!" or Santa entering a strip club and declaring "Ho, ho, hoes." *Santa's Slay* is one of that oft-overlooked breed of film that knows it's shamelessly trashy nonsense, offers neither pretense that it's anything else nor the faintest apology for it, and is all the more hilarious as a result. | AM





STAR WARS HOLIDAY SPECIAL (1978)

Everyone loves *Star Wars*, right? And everyone loves cheesy variety TV, don't they? Well, what better combination for festive viewing? This two-hour "special", and it genuinely is something special, was first broadcast on CBS for Thanksgiving 1978. Somehow featuring the main cast of *Star Wars* (it's not one of Harrison Ford's favourite memories), the *Holiday Special* follows Han Solo and Chewbacca as they return to Chewie's family for Wookiee holiday Life Day. From this framing narrative springs a surreal and inexplicable series of features, including Princess Leia's musical number to the tune of the *Star Wars* theme, a four-armed cooking demonstration, and a scene of an elderly Wookiee watching porn. On the plus side, the *Holiday Special* did introduce the iconic character of Boba Fett – so from that perspective, it's had quite a lasting legacy. Notoriously hated by everyone involved, George Lucas is on record as saying "If I had the time and a sledgehammer, I would track down every copy of that show and smash it." It's a catastrophic imbroglio that has no place in the *Star Wars* canon but might just have a place in your Christmas. | KM



BATMAN THE ANIMATED SERIES – SEASON 1, EPISODE 38: 'CHRISTMAS WITH THE JOKER' (1992)

Christmas eve in Gotham City, it's snowing and there's good will all around. Batman can't quite believe it, but Robin wants to head back for the cave and kick back to watch *It's a Wonderful Life*. Meanwhile in Arkham Asylum, the Joker is making his own plans for the Yule. Nothing says season's greetings from the Clown Prince of Crime like a homicidal crime wave. Escaping on a rocket powered Christmas tree, he wastes no time in hijacking every TV station and televising his own warped Christmas special which involves giant robots, blowing a railway bridge, property damage in the millions by somehow converting a telescope high atop Mount Gotham into a giant cannon and kidnapping Commissioner Gordon, Harvey Bullock and Summer Gleason with the intention of killing them – unless Batman and Robin can save the day. Which of course our heroes do – allowing them to finally settle down as Bruce and Dick and watch the movie which Commissioner Gordon has given them. The disturbing final shot is the straitjacket-wearing Joker maniacally singing a Christmas carol in a solitary padded cell. | RP

SMALLVILLE – SEASON 5, EPISODE 9: 'LEXMAS' (2005)

Given how obsessed *Smallville* was over potential "what if" scenarios, it's not really much of a surprise that the show's producers would create a riff on the classic, *It's a Wonderful Life*. What is remarkable is how good *Lexmas* is. Rather than asking the question "What would the world be like without Clark?" (a question they got round to answering much later), they instead ask the more interesting "What if Lex Luthor was good?". What we get is a melancholy but very moving story about the road less travelled, and it also adds a level of gravitas to Luthor that the character was beginning to lose at this point in the show's run. | EF



THE MUPPET CHRISTMAS CAROL (1992)

It wouldn't be Christmas without an adaptation of Dickens' seasonal classic and – with apologies to fans of the one with the flying shark – this version's definitive. Although lightweight by the author's standards, the novel is a world away from the procession of talking rats, rubber chicken factories and ice-skating penguins on display here. What's remarkable is how perfectly these two wildly disparate styles mesh to form a film faithful to both the source material and the madcap antics of the Muppets. Genuinely laugh out loud funny, the film has the best script of any of the Muppets' outings. Gonzo (as Dickens) and Rizzo get the largest share of laughs, with their frequent asides to camera not so much breaking the fourth wall as taking a wrecking ball to it. What makes the film work though is that, wisely, it balances the laughs with genuine emotion. Michael Caine's Scrooge is typically brilliant, with his gradual realisation that his relentless pursuit of wealth may have cost him his soul providing the film with its heart. Kermit's nephew Robin, as Tiny Tim, steals the show though, proving far more moving than a piece of felt has any right to be. It was nearly 20 years later, with last year's glorious comeback, before the Muppets managed something again approaching this level of genius. Hilarious, scary and touching, if there's a cinematic definition of pure joy, this is it. | IR





CURSE OF THE CAT PEOPLE (1944)

After the success of *Cat People*, producer Val Lewton was under pressure from the studio RKO to make a sequel. Eventually he came up with a resolutely non-horror children's fantasy about a lonely and misunderstood young girl called Amy (played by Ann Carter), whose wish for a playmate conjures up the ghost of Irena, the 'panther-woman' (Simone Simon) killed at the end of *Cat People*. The directing debut of Robert Wise (*Star Trek: The Motion Picture*), *Curse of the Cat People* is really only a sequel in name - no cat people feature or werewolf transformations take place. Instead, it's a magical tale of friendship between two outsiders, Amy and Irena, who, spurned by a cruel and unforgiving world, find love and understanding in each other. Unforgettable is the Christmas scene in which Amy is drawn away from the stuffy and hypocritical family celebrations to the garden where Irena's ghost awaits; Irena casts a spell for Amy's enchantment, magically transforming the garden into a snowy winter wonderland. A strange, haunting and poignant tale about tolerance and difference, perfectly evoking the true 'spirit' of Christmas, *Curse of the Cat People* is also one of the greatest films about childhood ever made. | JT



SUPERNATURAL – SEASON 3, EPISODE 8: 'A VERY SUPERNATURAL CHRISTMAS' (2007)

Supernatural is a show that has no problems with ramming its tongue firmly in its cheek, and delights in doing fresh and interesting things to keep the viewers happy. *A Very Supernatural Christmas* is introduced as a 'Very Special Presentation' in the manner that Christmas specials were presented on American TV in the '70s. Packed with jokes and clever Christmas references, the main story in this episode is pretty run-of-the-mill for *Supernatural*, as it features two jolly seeming people who resemble Mr and Mrs Santa Claus but are actually murderous pagan gods in disguise. It's the b-story that really makes this episode work. Told in flashback, we see what Christmas was like for Sam and Dean when they were kids; a given that their father spent most of his time hunting demons and leaving them home alone, it's fair to say their childhoods sucked. The performances are as splendid as they are poignant and tear-jerking. | EF

SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT (1984)

A true festive slasher in every sense, Charles E. Sellier Jr.'s 1984 film focussed on a sadistic, slaying Santa. How more Starburst could you get? B-grade horror with a yuletide glow does not get much better. Yes, the film may not be the greatest, but seeing the dementia, uncertainty, and splatter-kills of *Silent Night, Deadly Night* make it perfect for sinister snowy showings. Whilst the killer is sadly revealed to not be the actual jolly Saint Nic, it's still pretty cool to just see somebody in a Santa outfit descend into bat-shit crazy territory. Oh, and watch out for creepy grandparents, too. | AP



THE TWILIGHT ZONE – SEASON 3, EPISODE 102: 'THE CHANGING OF THE GUARD' (1962)

Donald Pleasance, in his debut US TV appearance, plays elderly English literature professor Ellis Fowler. The school is closing for the holidays and Fowler is full of Christmas spirit, bidding his students farewell. The festive pleasantries are short-lived as the school principle decides it is time for a 'new broom' and enforces Fowler's retirement. He is devastated at the decision and whilst reminiscing about former students, Fowler convinces himself that his lessons were valueless and that he has accomplished nothing with his life. Consumed by guilt and self-loathing he decides that he must die to atone for his failures. As he wanders the school grounds he finds the place to end his life and as he prepares to do so the tolling of the class bell stays Fowler's hand. Curiosity quells his destructive impulse as he finds himself drawn back to his former classroom and some unexpected visitors. This has all the ingredients of a classic spooky Christmas story: snow, ghosts and redemption. Pleasance provides a deeply moving performance as Fowler, a man who cherishes sharing his passion for literature, and whose salvation is found in... The Twilight Zone. | CJ





RARE EXPORTS: A CHRISTMAS TALE (2010)

A group of Lapland reindeer herders have their work interrupted by an excavation in the nearby Korvatunturi Mountains. Hidden in the Arctic fell is a gigantic burial mound, from which the workmen release something ancient and deadly. A field of slaughtered reindeer is only the beginning, and when local children begin to go missing, with creepy little wicker dolls left in their place, it's clear something is very wrong. Things only get stranger when a naked old man is found caught in a wolf trap; an old man who has a taste for gingerbread cookies. And sports a big white beard. A feature length prequel to Finnish filmmakers Jalmari and Juuso Helander's award winning shorts, *Rare Exports* is a horror movie acknowledging how the potency of myths and legends can be distorted and diluted over time. Whereas the image we have nowadays of Santa Claus (or more specifically in this case, Joulupukki) is of a portly and jovial dispenser of joy to well-behaved children, here the inverse inference comes to the fore: naughty children are punished. Twisted and hilarious ("Tell him we're holding Santa for ransom"), it's a horror movie with heart and imagination. And it features a man being killed by a pickaxe to the head. | AM



BLACK CHRISTMAS (1974)

Bob Clark's 1974 *Black Christmas* is generally held responsible for starting the 'slasher' subgenre. Acting as inspiration for the likes of *Halloween*, *When a Stranger Calls* and *Friday the 13th*, the film is one of the most unsettling Christmas-themed viewings you could undertake. Be it torment via the telephone, stalking, eyeballs staring through doors, or even just eerie Christmas carols, *Black Christmas* is a legend in the field of horror. With early roles for the brilliant Olivia Hussey, the future Lois Lane (also known simply as Margot Kidder), and a nice turn from *A Nightmare on Elm Street*'s John Saxon, *Black Christmas* is essential viewing. | AP

THE TWILIGHT ZONE – SEASON 2, EPISODE 47: 'NIGHT OF THE MEEK' (1960)

Art Carney plays Henry Corwin, a down and out alcoholic department store Santa Claus. After one too many drinks, he is fired from his job. As he staggers off, he pitifully laments to his boss, "Just on one Christmas I'd like to see the meek inherit the Earth." What follows is Rod Serling's writing at its best. Corwin finds a beaten up old sack filled with tin cans and garbage. To his delight, he finds that the sack produces whatever gift its recipient wants. Roaming the streets, he spreads Christmas cheer to the downtrodden denizens of the streets. In the end, when the sack runs dry, Corwin is given the most heartwarming of second chances. While it sounds cliché, Serling's simple concept truly shows the viewers at home the unfiltered true meaning of the holiday season. In a change of pace, it's a season where even Rod Serling allowed for a good person to get their just comeuppance. | NM



PROMETHEUS (2012)

"It's Christmas, captain, and I want to open my presents." Charlie Holloway's line to Captain Janek, in Ridley Scott's 2012 sci-fi drama, *Prometheus*, works as a macabre portent for later events. After all, what Holloway and his team unwrap is the gift that keeps on taking. Earlier – to the surprise and mild annoyance of Meredith Vickers – Janek plants a small Christmas tree on a pool table. Why is *Prometheus* so concerned with this period of earthly festivity when the story takes place so far in outer space? The symbolism of it all is surprisingly clear: *Prometheus* is a tale of incredible birth with cosmic consequences. Shaw and Holloway – if we want to stretch things even further – are aligned to the figures Mary and Joseph. Do they not follow a certain star located on the series of celestial maps found and go there to take their part in a very special birth? One thing absent from *Prometheus* is any wise men. Critics attacked the movie for its lack of logic and shaky character motivations. It might seem unlikely, for sure, but Scott's film is almost a sci-fi retelling of The Nativity story... with monsters. | MC





IRON MAN 3 (2013)

Iron Man 3 is set during the festive season, though the pace is so fast that you would be forgiven if you didn't even notice. However, when you consider this time of year is all about a jolly man dressed in red, flying through the air, you do wonder why it's taken so long for anyone to connect Christmas with Ol' Shellhead. Of course, the third movie in this series doesn't really capture the Christmas spirit at all (even *Die Hard* is better for that), but this major Marvel movie is full of little touches, from the super-sized stuffed bunny at the start to fights in the snow and the rather catastrophic opening of "gifts", the festive backdrop adds an extra level of isolation and realism to the feature. | EF



THE BBC'S GHOST STORIES FOR CHRISTMAS

Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* didn't actually start the tradition of ghost stories being told at Yuletide but it certainly popularised something that we associate with a season the Victorians almost entirely reinvented. Then in the 20th century, M. R. James turned Christmas ghost stories into something of an exact science. His tales were about academics doing academic things in possibly academic places. No papers ever went unauthenticated in the universities and colleges of M. R. James-land and you'd be forgiven for wondering if anyone actually did anything productive back then. But our rational protagonists were soon experiencing rum goings on as they realise, to their horror, that the world is not quite so rational. As the stories often didn't end well for those academics you might wonder why we're so keen on all this at Christmas. Nevertheless, we are, and the BBC have spent the last 45 years (on and off) bringing them to life either as fully-fledged dramatisations or as Robert Powell or Christopher Lee reading the stories as James originally intended. If the BBC aren't bothering this year, their past efforts have been brought to DVD by the BFI and, since they've done no less than three different versions of *Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You My Lad*, it'd be rude not to start with one of those. | JK

SILENT NIGHT (2012)

Initially billed as a remake of *Silent Night, Deadly Night*, this 2012 film from Steven C. Miller is pretty much only linked by having a serially slashing Santa as its 'big bad.' Rather than going for tension and lunacy, this effort goes purely for the bloodshed and tears, including a *Fargo*-inspired run-in with a wood-chipper, and a flame-thrower wielding Father Christmas. Up there with all of the scares, we also have a ridiculously over-the-top, arguably laughable performance from the hot-and-cold Malcolm McDowell as the Police Chief that heads-up the town, being brutalised by Kris Kringle. One of the weaker films on this list, but it's pure trash filmmaking at its entertainingly-bad best. | AP



IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE (1946)

Of course it's on the list! Because *It's A Wonderful Life* is, in essence, the definitive Christmas film. Not only does the bulk of the action take place on Christmas Eve, its message of goodness in the spirit of man is completely fitting with the season, and it blends fantasy with pathos gloriously. While it's completely sentimental (it's a Frank Capra film, after all), what's not to love about a film in which an angel (second class) attempts to get his wings through helping a desperate man, George Bailey (James Stewart). He shows him what would have happened had he never been born, and the positive impact he has had on others. There is also a great bad guy in the shape of bitter businessman Mr Potter (Lionel Barrymore), who can rival any screen villain for nastiness. It's a film referenced and parodied countless times, but never fails to melt even the hardest heart. From the opening moments of celestial bodies discussing George, who is about to kill himself over some missing money, to the triumphant finale, there isn't a bad element in the picture. Just be ready to have 'something in your eye' by the time the credits roll. | MU



GIVE THE MAN A HAND

WORDS: GRANT KEMPSTER



MICHAEL ROOKER ON THE WALKING DEAD, GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY, HIS LOVE FOR JAMES GUNN AND WHY HE WON'T BE IN EXPENDABLES 4...

Starburst: We hear you went to London Film and Comic Con recently.

Michael Rooker: I most certainly did, I went down there for the afternoon. I brought a mask and I was going to go in with it on but I kind of forgot and so when I went in folks recognised me. I just paid for my ticket and was going to walk in but they saw me and gave me a VIP pass.

So are you a fan of the sci-fi and fantasy genre?

Yeah, I love the stuff and I love looking around. Nowadays it's hard to just look around because if you're not in disguise the community just come and get you. It's really exciting to go there, you know you wanna go and just relax and look around but you gotta [go in disguise]. I didn't think I'd ever wear a mask and stuff like that but these days it's a must. I've been to a few with a mask on and I was able to walk around a little bit. I just can't talk, I gotta be careful what I say because people recognise my voice and then it's like, "Oh well, what the hell."

It must be nice to get a reaction to your work.

You get an instant reaction to all your work. Now because of the popularity of Merle, people see my other work. They see the stuff that I'd done when I was 22 like *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* and they would have never done that if they hadn't seen my work in *The Walking Dead*, which is amazing.

Although you've been working pretty solidly since *Henry*, would you say that *The Walking Dead* has brought about a comeback for Michael Rooker?

Good God yeah. Sure man, you could definitely say that. I've been working in this business for quite a long time so it's crazy true; it's bizarre how true that is. As an actor, working all those years, you don't think about that of course. You just work. I've gone back through [my movies] and watched and thought, "Oh wow, it's amazing how much I've grown over the years", and it's pretty cool to be able to see that. And now to see the revelation and the development of the character of Merle Dixon and how people have completely fallen in love



with this guy and are so upset that he's gone from the show. It really moves them and I'm moved by that. It's amazing that people get it! You know you do a film and everything and they get it but then the film is gone. When you're doing a show like *The Walking Dead* every week it really solidifies in the audiences mind; who they like, who they don't care for.

Merle certainly gave you the opportunity to show a different side to your acting ability with his character arc.

The arc for this character was so well done. We did it, damn it, we added what needed to be there. You see a bad-ass guy in the beginning but then you realise this cat was high. When he first arrives and he's shooting zombie's heads off and confronting T-Dog he's high as a kite. No matter who came and told him to stop he would have been right in their face and telling them to go shove it. To be able to go from that to the sardonic humour that's there when I'm chained up on the pipe saying lines like 'Sugar tits' and you get to smear it in the faces of the audience a little but and then all of a sudden, turn around and they do something that's completely unexpected. They actually leave me, not intentionally but he's left on the rooftop to die, chained up like some wild animal and as soon as that happens the audience's sympathy went from our group right to Merle. And so from then on I think you really start appreciating the different colours and the different sides to Merle Dixon. So that all combines and develops into a beautiful arc for the character. And my God, the love for his brother [Daryl Dixon] is paramount, that's above all and everybody can relate to that, no matter who you are.

Thanks to the popularity of the character, and your ongoing relationship with director James Gunn, this has culminated in your role as Yondu in Marvel's *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

I think [James Gunn's] overall role is to make sure people know my work. It's almost his personal deal to make sure audiences fucking understand that yeah, we have some really cool cats working in this business. It's amazing. Gunn has loved my work since the beginning of my career and we've had a relationship for the last eight years. He called me in for *Slither* and from then on we've developed a friendship and also an actor/director relationship that means that almost everything he does he wants me to be a part of. I'm really blessed with that and he's a great guy to work for and work with and be around.

You stayed in character for your first role of Henry Lee Lucas, is that something you tried with Yondu?

I can't stay in Yondu these days, I mean I gotta get the paint off! I'm having a great time on *Guardians of the Galaxy* and [Gunn is] having a killer time getting it all done



"I THINK JAMES GUNN'S OVERALL ROLE IS TO MAKE SURE PEOPLE KNOW MY WORK. IT'S ALMOST HIS PERSONAL DEAL TO MAKE SURE AUDIENCES UNDERSTAND THAT WE HAVE SOME REALLY COOL CATS WORKING IN THIS BUSINESS."

and trying not to miss anything. You know how big movies are so you have to really pay attention to this stuff and try and get it all done in the amount of time you're allowed to do it in. I'm happy to be working with him yet again, it's fucking amazing.

So what next? Given your revived popularity and past experience working with the likes of Sly Stallone and Arnie, could we be seeing you in the next *Expendables* movie?

You know I probably won't be on

Expendables 4 or 5, just simply because I steal scenes from these guys all the time. I don't know, I love and enjoyed working with both of them. I love that these movies are popular and these guys are in there giving it their all. It only proves that actors, we don't go away man, we just keep going. As long as the writers write roles for us we're still going to be out there kicking ass.

THE WALKING DEAD – SEASON 3 is available now on DVD/Blu-ray. GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY opens August 1st, 2014.



Bela Lugosi

THE VAMPIRE

With his Eastern European accent and sinister screen presence, Bela Lugosi was one of the most popular and instantly recognisable stars of early horror cinema. However, despite being predominantly associated with the Dracula character, he only actually played The Count twice in full length features on the big screen; at the start and the end of the Universal Monsters cycle. When asked to do a Dracula voice, people invariably impersonate Lugosi with a thick Hungarian "I want to suck your blood"; such was his portrayal's influence.

He had already gained significant experience with the part long before the 1931 film as he had starred in the Broadway adaptation of Bram Stoker's Gothic masterpiece, which opened in 1927. He wasn't Universal's first choice for the film role, however. The studio had intended to get John Wray, who had been impressive in *All Quiet on*

HORROR

Obscura

This month the masticating Martin Unsworth takes a look at one of the great stars of classic horror, and how he never really shook his signature role ..

the *Western Front* (1930) and later appeared as Dr Haines in the brilliant *Doctor X* (1932) as the star, but wisely, they changed their mind. Out of all the actors rumoured, perhaps only Conrad Veidt would have been suitable. As it stands, Lugosi's take on the role has stood the test of time. While the film is not perfect, random armadillos and the infamous Jerusalem Cricket crawling from its own tiny coffin make it visually confusing, it paved the way for a whole new world of horror cinema and made Bela's interpretation of Dracula iconic.

A more obscure appearance was in a 1933 short, *Hollywood on Parade No A-8*. One of a series of short films made by Paramount Pictures to play along with the newsreels. Lugosi appears in this one, set in a Hollywood wax museum. The exhibits come to life, notably Betty Boop, portrayed by Bonnie Poe, one of the several women who voiced the animated version. Following her song, the figure of Dracula steps down from the display and takes Betty in his arms, ready to sink his teeth into her neck, saying in his distinctive way, "You have booped your last boop." The character had embedded itself into pop culture so much that in 1933 Disney even included a caricature of Lugosi (along with Frederic March's Mr Hyde and Boris Karloff's monster) in the Mickey Mouse cartoon *Mickey's Gala Premiere*. Lugosi, however, found he couldn't capitalise on the success of the role. Karloff was Universal's go-to star for the bigger roles thanks to his fantastic turn in *Frankenstein* (1931); a role originally intended for Bela himself.

So he found himself becoming a regular in poverty row B-pictures, but he would play the role of vampire or at least 'fake' vampire, on several other occasions. The first was *Mark of the Vampire* (1935), a sound remake of the 1927 Lon Chaney film, *London After Midnight*. Directed once again by Tod Browning, MGM practically buried the silent version when they released the update, taking it out of circulation before it was eventually lost forever, due to a vault fire in 1967. After making *Dracula* for Universal, Browning moved to MGM, making *Freaks* and *The Devil Doll* (though his work on that went uncredited) and the 1939 murder mystery *Miracles for Sale*, before retiring from the business. Adapted from his story, *The Hypnotist*, a title which both reveals a plot point and is a pointer to the false vampire scheme, the film shows how different production values were between the two studios. Coming only a few short years after *Dracula*, the sets and atmosphere in *Mark* are light years ahead. The cinematographer, James Wong Howe, would go on to have a long and illustrious career, including late on in life, the stunning work on John Frankenheimer's *Seconds* (1966). Among the cast are Lionel Atwill and Lionel Barrymore (best remembered as "old man" Potter in *It's a Wonderful Life*), essentially playing the Van Helsing character, although Barrymore is much more entertaining. Alongside an underused Lugosi, there is the stunning Carroll Borland, as Luna, the Bat Woman. It's such a shame that they denounce the vampire angle as, up to the point where they reveal the true story, their scenes are powerfully creepy. They first appear, descending a crumbling, dusty staircase, almost identical to the one in *Dracula*, even emulating the 'walk through the spider's web' moment. Various bugs scurry on the ground, (fake) spiders crawl the walls and, to make up for the lack of armadillos, a possum runs across the set. Luna is even seen, at one point, floating down from above with bat wings held aloft. Apart from a spot of blood on his forehead, Lugosi may as well be Dracula; the costume, hair and demeanour are all the same. His only dialogue comes at the end, after we have found out they are just actors, paid to help expose a killer. Rather self mockingly, he says: "This vampire business, it has given me a great idea for a new act. Luna, in this new act, I will be the vampire! Did you watch me? I gave all of me. I was greater than any real vampire." Although some fans now see this twist ending as a cop-out which spoils the film, one has to remember that this is how the 'holy grail' Chaney film would have ended too. The trailer for the film is unique in that it features Lugosi, in costume, speaking directly to the audience, even reading the cast of actors.

The Return of the Vampire, made by Columbia Studios in 1944, bore





no relation to any previous film, but certainly seemed familiar. It was also of a higher standard than most of Lugosi's work outside the Universal series. In it, he plays Armand Tesla, a vampire at large in London at the end of the First World War. He makes the mistake of biting a child, the daughter of scientist Dr Walter Saunders (Gilbert Emery, *Dracula's Daughter*, 1936). He and his associate, Lady Jane Ainsley (Frieda Inescort) track him down to his coffin and stake him. They also discover Andreas (Matt Willis) who has been under his control, in the form of a werewolf. With Telsa gone, Andreas is free and helps the scientists at their research lab. Years later, Saunders is killed in an air crash, and World War II has begun. During a bombing raid, the cemetery suffers a hit, disturbing Tesla's remains. A pair of bungling grave diggers (one played by the affable Billy Bevan) remove what they assume is shrapnel from the body, allowing Tesla to regenerate. This also puts Andreas back in his control, and, assuming the guise of Dr Hugo Bruckner, an eminent scientist smuggled to England from Europe, infiltrates the laboratories of Lady Jane. Young Nicki (Nina Foch), the child he once bit, becomes an obsession for Tesla. In the meantime, police chief Sir Frederick Fleet (Miles Mander, *The Pearl of Death*, 1944) has found evidence that the pair may have desecrated a body decades earlier, and demands to see the body they impaled. This is a surprisingly well made film, which essentially remakes *Dracula* without actually having to pay for the privilege. The added attraction is the werewolf figure, whose job it is to protect and serve his master, and as such is not a typical lycanthrope. While in wolf form, he walks and talks (and is often seen walking around with a bundle wrapped in brown paper), but the character is completely sympathetic. Even in the short running time, we get to know him as Andreas and feel sorry for the wretched soul forced to obey a bloodsucking master. The feel and aesthetic of the film is better accomplished than the Universal monster mash-ups of the time, and the demise of Tesla is surprisingly grisly, more so even than the later crumbling *Dracula* in the 1958 Hammer film. It's just a shame that Mander's character breaks the fourth wall right at the end.

Universal finally allowed Bela to play the Count once more in *Bud Abbott and Lou Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948). Seen by many as the death rattle of the Universal series, it actually stands up as a very funny comedy, and more importantly, takes the monsters seriously. Lon Chaney Jr reprises his role of Laurence Talbot, still depressed at being cursed as the Wolf Man, and Glen Strange under the make-up as the Frankenstein monster. Talbot has found out Dracula wants to resurrect the monster and is looking for a new brain, with goofball Costello in line as the donor. Dracula stalks the comedian with his cape over his face, showing only those piercing, hypnotising eyes; foreshadowing the make-do impression Tom Mason does in Ed Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959). A nice gag has a (non) appearance of the Invisible Man in the finale, voiced by Vincent Price. The film also boasts a glorious animated title sequence by Walter Lanz, best known for *Woody Woodpecker*. He provides an animated transformation

of Bela turning into a bat. During filming, Strange broke his ankle, and Chaney stepped in to complete some scenes in the monster make-up. He had played the monster officially in *The Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942), and, of course, was in the cape and dinner suit as Count Alucard, in *Son of Dracula* (1943), which was

interestingly the first portrayal of the Count with a moustache, as Stoker had written.

Often overlooked (some would say rightfully so), *Mother Riley Meets the Vampire* (aka *Vampire Over London*, 1952) was filmed in England while Bela was undertaking a provincial tour of *Dracula*. Contrary to popular stories, the tour was quite successful, running for almost six months, and playing in almost every town, even the suburbs of London. It was only disappointing that it didn't transfer to the West End (and, in turn, Broadway) as Lugosi and the crew had hoped. Renown Pictures asked the man who secured Lugosi for the theatrical tour, Richard Gordon (who would go on to bigger things as the producer of such classics as *Horror Hospital*, *Corridors of Blood* and *Fiend Without A Face*) to come up with a story, after the success Universal had with their monster comedy. Taking their once popular but fading star, Old Mother Riley (alter-ego of music hall comedian Arthur Lucan) and concocting a story outline in which a scientist calling himself The Vampire (Lugosi, obviously) was kidnapping young women to use their blood while attempting to steal uranium to create a master-race of robots. So far, though, he has only managed to make one (a delightfully clunky, very old school one it is too) which arrives at the shop run by Riley by mistake while Lugosi takes possession of Riley's inherited bed warmer. The conceit of Lugosi's character obviously plays on the role he had as the real Count in the Abbott and Costello film - part vampire, part mad scientist. However, despite all the talk of bloodsucking early in the film, it turns out to be just a sham.

The Old Mother Riley character was an abrasive Irish washer-woman who ran a store with her daughter Kitty (played by Lucan's wife, Kitty McShane). By the time they planned the vampire film, the couple had split acrimoniously, so she doesn't feature in what would be the last Riley film. Lucan took the character back to the stage, before dying pre-show in 1954. Some of the humour hasn't aged well, and at some points a character calls Riley both "an old faggot" and "fag-end". While this may not translate well to present sensibilities, at least it's not as annoying as contemporary variations of the act, such as the horrendous Mrs Brown. The film is worth watching for some early appearances from great British actors Dora Bryan, Hattie Jacques, Dandy Nichols and John Le Mesurier. Those of a nervous disposition, be warned, there's an awful song and dance routine early on, and it's full of comedy sound effects such as slide whistles and tweeting birds when people are hit on the head. While not in the best of health, his morphine addiction hadn't started to show and it is fabulous to watch Lugosi get fully into the spirit of the film. The director, John Gilling, would later work on a number of Hammer films, helming the obscure classic *The Shadow of the Cat* (1961), *The Plague of the Zombies*, *The Reptile* (both 1966) and *The Mummy's Shroud* (1967), as well as cult TV shows *The Saint*, *The Champions* and *Department S*. The film was re-released in the US in 1963, with a new title and theme tune sung by Allan Sherman. Inspired by his hit album *My Son*, *The Folk Singer*, its new, nonsensical title would be *My Son, The Vampire*.

In 1952, Lugosi appeared on the American TV show *You Asked For It*, dressed in the stereotypical vampire robes, at the request of a viewer (such was the nature of the show). In an elaborate stage trick, he turns Shirley Patterson (who was later billed as Shawn Smith in classic B-movies such as *It! The Terror From Beyond Space* and *The Land Unknown*) into a flying, flapping bat. On the show, Bela discusses his upcoming projects with the host Art Baker, one of which is a series called *Dracula*; sadly, none of which saw the light of day.

However, there was one final occasion where Lugosi donned the Dracula costume as he was laid to rest wearing it. One would like to think that, had he lived, Bela would have reprised his signature role on the small screen, side by side with Karloff, Chaney and Peter Lorre in the *Lizard's Leg and Owlet's Wing* episode of *Route 66* (1962) in which the ageing actors donned their most famous costumes, attempting to scare a modern audience.



MOVIE REVIEWS



IN FEAR

Cert: 15 / Director: Jeremy Lovering / Screenplay: Jeremy Lovering / Starring: Iain de Caestecker, Alice Englert, Allen Leech / Release Date: Out Now

In Fear is powered by a beautifully simple dramatic conceit. A young couple, just two weeks into a new relationship, is on their way to a music festival somewhere in Ireland. As a romantic gesture, Tom (De Caestecker, now one of the Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.) has booked a room in an off-the-beaten-track country hotel so that he and Lucy (Englert) can get to know each other a little better before they meet up with friends. But they quickly get lost in wild, unfamiliar countryside,

signposts directing them to the hotel send them round and round in circles; it's getting dark, the petrol's running low and there's someone outside intent on seriously spooking them.

Writer/director Jeremy Lovering has crafted an incredibly taut, uncomfortable and intensely claustrophobic thriller. Set largely inside Tom's car, the film is for the most part a two-hander, the playful and yet slightly nervous getting-to-know-you relationship between Tom and Lucy, turning into

something edgier as they begin to appreciate first that they're completely lost in unfamiliar territory and later that they're being targeted by someone with a grudge out in the encroaching darkness. Tom's jokey, eager-to-please banter and Lucy's slightly coy standoffishness are quickly forgotten as night falls and desperation and panic set in. Lovering employs tight close-ups inside the car to create a real sense of dread accentuated by subtle, underplayed scares; half-seen figures looming out of the

darkness or lurking at the side of the road, Lucy's clothes stolen from the car during a moment when it's left unattended (the first real sign that something a bit odd is going on) and finally an ominous encounter with the terrified, bloodied Max (Leech) who quickly becomes an unwanted passenger.

A grim situation starts to get a whole lot worse – and just a little bit less plausible – for Tom and Lucy and it's only now that the pair, who have already shown a tendency to behave irrationally, by constantly getting in and out of their relatively secure car in the dead of night on the vaguest of whims, begin to make decisions that can only encourage the audience to throw their hands up in despair and wail “Why the Hell did you do that?” There's one particular moment when Tom, perhaps to reassert his mastery over the situation and his own masculinity, takes matters into his own hands and thereby sets the tone for the film's last act which is at once unbearably grim and impossibly frustrating because it could have been so easily avoided.

But for the most part *In Fear*, largely improvised with the two leads only broadly aware of the general direction of the story, is a quiet triumph. Gripping and immaculately staged, it'll strike a chord with anyone who's found themselves driving along narrow, muddy, unfamiliar country lanes in the early evening with no real idea where they're going and hopefully serve as a reminder that, sometimes, there's nothing quite like a handy Travelodge.

Paul Mount

EXPECTED ★★★★★★ 6

ACTUAL ★★★★★★★★ 9



ESCAPE PLAN

Cert: 15 / **Director:** Mikael Håfström / **Screenplay:** Miles Chapman, Jason Keller / **Starring:** Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson, Jim Caviezel, Vinnie Jones / **Release Date:** Out Now

The *Expendables* franchise in 2010 gave action fans an orgasmic situation on-screen, the first meeting of '80s icons Sylvester Stallone and (then governor) Arnold Schwarzenegger in one scene... together. The 2012 sequel further expanded their screen time but never have the two shared one film entirely, until now. *Escape Plan*, despite a bland title, has a lot to ingratiate itself to '80s kids brought up on a strict diet of *Cobra*, *Commando*, *Predator* and *First Blood*. However, this film is not quite the explosive, balls-to-the-wall, all-out actioner many may be expecting and indeed those awaiting a grand Arnie vs Sly showdown may leave a touch disappointed. That being said, this action-thriller (with sci-fi elements) came to entertain and it certainly accomplishes that aim.

The story focuses on Ray Breslin (Stallone), a man who tests the security of prisons for a living. However, with a new 'shady' assignment he is offered the chance to test a whole new level of prison. Not too soon after, he is set up and imprisoned in a structurally sound complex known as 'The Tomb'. In

his attempts to escape, he must work with fellow inmate Swan Rottmayer (Schwarzenegger) and formulate a plan. The plotting, though smarter than the norm, is a little *Lock-Up* in nature.

There is no doubting that this film may have come 30 years too late to reach its full potential but as they say, better late than never. Though the action is not as plentiful as some of the stars'

biggest hits, there are engaging thrills to be had and the comedic backbone is most welcome. Schwarzenegger looks to be having a ball in his part, dropping cheesy lines and chomping up the atmosphere. Stallone shows once again, for a fella his age, he has many rounds left yet and there are some surprising (and well played) appearances from the likes of Vinnie Jones, Curtis Jackson and

Sam Neil, as well as a tie-strokingly over-the-top bad guy in the shape of former on-screen Jesus, Jim Caviezel. Everyone is having fun with the preposterous material and it's infectious.

In fairness, the action, though fun, could have been much better and the brief scrap between Stallone and Schwarzenegger is not the one fans have been eager to see all these years. Additionally the camerawork occasionally vibrates too vigorously during the fight sequences, meaning some aspects are hard to fully take in. Håfström directs with a firm touch and one machine gun scene in particular plays on Arnie's cinematic reputation. Even so, there is a feeling more could have been done with *Escape Plan* (formerly *The Tomb* but renamed— perhaps to avoid jokes regarding the leads' respective ages).

Escape Plan is not as playfully knowing as *The Last Stand* or as action-packed as *Bullet to the Head* but it's entertaining and it utilises its leading men's macho chemistry (ironic considering their off-screen past) to a good effect. It may not be art but when Arnie pronounces, "You hit like a vegetarian", I doubt anybody will be crying over not getting the film equivalent of a Monet. Good Saturday night, '80s saluting, fun.

Jack Bottomley

EXPECTED  8

ACTUAL  7





SAVING MR. BANKS

Cert: PG / **Director:** John Lee Hancock / **Screenplay:** Kelly Marcel, Sue Smith / **Starring:** Emma Thompson, Tom Hanks, Colin Farrell / **Release Date:** Out Now

Disney's *Mary Poppins* (1964) is one of the few fantasy films which virtually everyone with even a passing interest in cinema seems to know. What most people aren't aware of however is the true story of P.L. Travers, the woman whose damaged childhood in Australia gave life to the iconic, no-nonsense nanny who brought magic into the lives of the Banks family at No 17, Cherry Tree Lane.

For a period of twenty-odd years the master storyteller Walt Disney courted Travers, trying to persuade her to let him bring the magical *Mary Poppins* to the big screen. Eventually in 1961, Travers agreed to travel to Hollywood to meet Disney and discuss the development of the film. The following fortnight, which Travers spent in America, created a drama almost as legendary as the film it produced.

The relatively straightforward story of Disney's *Saving Mr. Banks*, starring that most English of actresses Emma Thompson as Travers, alongside the archetypal Hollywood star Tom Hanks as the jovial Disney, focuses on the programme of persuasion which Disney embarked upon in order to get Travers to allow him to

recreate his interpretation of her books. Its no frills approach allows room for each of the main actors to bring a group of highly complex individuals to life on screen in a way which, though it may not necessarily make you like the characters, does create a degree of sympathy for each of them. After watching the film's depiction of her early years – with a father (played with uncharacteristic mellowness by Colin Farrell) who escaped his humdrum life as a bank manager (inspiration for the character of Mr. Banks) with the help of his vivid imagination and a bottle of

whiskey; her well-meaning yet hopelessly overwhelmed mother (Mrs. Banks); and a wealthy aunt who seemed to appear from nowhere shortly prior to her father's death, bringing a semblance of order to the young girl's life (Mary Poppins) – you can understand why Travers felt so attached to her creation, and was so distraught when she saw what Disney did to it.

Equally well, the film subtly shows Disney's well-documented darker side. Though on the face of it he was a warm and friendly man who won Travers over in part by constantly telling her how much her stories meant to his daughters, he clearly kept his own long-term goals in sight.

In *Saving Mr. Banks* director John Lee Hancock and writer Kelly Marcel have created a film in which the narrative flits between turn-of-the-century Australia and 1960s California, seamlessly melding the two periods of Travers' life. By including snatches of *Mary Poppins*' songs and iconic imagery, Marcel's screenplay also creates a fresh and engrossing film, whilst respecting the original – an enviable achievement in anyone's book.

Cleaver Patterson

EXPECTED 6

ACTUAL 9





ENDER'S GAME

Cert: 12A / **Director:** Gavin Hood / **Screenplay:** Gavin Hood / **Starring:** Asa Butterfield, Harrison Ford, Ben Kingsley, Abigail Breslin / **Release Date:** Out Now

Based on Orson Scott Card's 1985 novel, *Ender's Game* is a very curious cinematic creature indeed. As a cross between *Harry Potter* and *Starship Troopers*, it's undoubtedly a powerful and at times thought-provoking sci-fi parable but it does seem to fall between two poles-apart stools. Is it a children's film (the core cast are all youngsters) or is it an adult sci-fi movie using young characters to craft a subtle political allegory, which holds up a mirror, as the best SF should, to the world we live in today? Superficially it's a big, broad space opera but it's also desperately talky, low on action and proper thrills and it delivers the most anti-climactic climax in recent genre cinema history. In some ways *Ender's Game* is to be applauded for giving the audience what it doesn't expect and foregoing empty spectacle for something a little more introspective but the end result is a film which seems oddly uncommercial and which may seriously struggle at the box office.

In the future the Earth has successfully repelled – at some cost to life, limb and property – an invasion by a race of alien insects called the Formics (renamed from the much more sniggerable 'buggers' of the novel). Earth's

governments are twitchy about a possible second attack and they're monitoring gathering Formic forces out in deep space. What they need is a new and imaginative way of tactical thinking and to this end(er) they recruit a bunch of game-literate kids who, it's hoped, can bring a more instinctive and intuitive approach to the battlefield. One such ingénue is Andrew 'Ender' Wiggin (Butterfield), an introverted but brilliant young boy who is press-ganged into joining the International Fleet's Battle School space station training facility. Here Ender slowly earns the respect of his contemporaries and his elders and finds himself in the Command School and potentially in charge of the entire space fleet. But first he has to prove himself in one final strategic war game simulation where the stakes are the future of Earth itself...

Ender's Game, despite its good intentions and its remit to tell a proper, hard SF story instead of the usual humans vs. monsters stuff, is just a bit dull. There's plenty of CGI loveliness to gawp at if you're so inclined – the initial recreation of the final battle in the first confrontation between humanity and the Formics

promises thrills and spills to come – but much of it is fairly mundane space opera/space station stuff which has a certain *2001* realism about it but quickly becomes tedious to look at. Weightless training sequences seem to go on forever without much in the way of incident and it's this uneventfulness, which scuppers the back half of the movie once it's established its world and its story. Ender himself is painfully young-looking and is cold and rather emotionless as a lead character – that's sort of the point of him, it's what makes him special and ideal for the task he's being trained for – but it makes it tough to root for him or care much what happens to him. And unfortunately, not much does happen to him. Under the watchful eye of gruff Colonel Graff (Harrison Ford looking suitably grizzled and war-weary) Ender slowly becomes more assured and more determined. Unfortunate casting ensures that scenes of Ender being tormented by young senior trainee Bonzo, are left floundering by the fact that the actor who plays him (Moises Arias) is about half Butterfield's size and what looks like a budding romance between Ender and fellow student Valentine (Breslin), which would have given

the film a much-needed touch of humanity, comes to nothing. A last-minute appearance by Ben Kingsley as a bizarrely face-painted military hero seems to have little point other than to give Ender a confidence boost and it serves merely to undermine the dramatic punch of the battle which ended the first war between Mankind and the Formics.

Ender's Game struggles to engender much real enthusiasm but there's still plenty to admire in its visual aesthetic (it builds its world with utter conviction), its faultless FX and its very worthy attempt to tell a more intelligent SF story than cinema audiences may be used to. But it's the very fact that it is intelligent and doesn't go in for cheap thrills and spills which is likely to prove to be its undoing. Time may well see *Ender's Game* become a genre classic but modern blockbuster-soaked audiences are likely to be frustrated by its heel-dragging and its sense of inertia.

Paul Mount

EXPECTED 

ACTUAL 



THOR: THE DARK WORLD

Cert: 12A / **Director:** Alan Taylor / **Screenplay:** Christopher Yost, Christopher Markus, Stephen McFeely / **Starring:** Chris Hemsworth, Natalie Portman, Tom Hiddleston, Kat Dennings, Stellan Skarsgard, Christopher Eccleston
Release Date: Out Now

As DC Comics dither or else fumble the ball with the cinematic exploitations of their superhero titles, Marvel Studios continue to knock it out of the park time and again with their immaculately planned slate of costumed hero action movies. *Thor: The Dark World* hammers home the advantage, leaving recent Dark Knights and Men of Steel grubbing around in the dirt looking tired, underwhelming and derivative. *TDW* joins and possibly even surpasses *Iron Man 3* as the superhero movie of 2013;

it's bigger, brasher, bolder and a damn sight more fun than Kenneth Branagh's worthy, pompous, low key (it's the joke that never stops giving) 2011 debut for Chris Hemsworth's twinkling, muscle bound Asgardian adventurer. Taking its cue from *Marvel's Avengers Assemble* this a movie with a spring in its step, its tongue in its cheek and its money right up there on the screen.

One of the great delights of Marvel's movies is the sense of interconnectedness they've achieved across the last few

years, with each film harking back to the last (or earlier) and hinting at the next (or later). In this second solo outing for Thor, Loki (Hiddleston) has been returned to Asgard to face the wrath of Dad Odin (Hopkins at his booming best) to atone for his attack on New York in the *Avengers* movie. With his bitter half-brother imprisoned, Thor sets about bringing peace to the Nine Realms, but lurking in the darkness is an ancient, timeless enemy of Asgard - the monstrous Malekith (Eccleston), and his army of elves will stop at nothing to secure the terrible power source known as the Aether, which will give Malekith dominion over all Creation. Back on Earth, Jane Foster (Portman) has been waiting two years for Thor to return and she's moving on - just as her ditzzy assistant Darcy Lewis (Dennings) and the new intern ("my name's Ian") make a discovery which will bring two worlds quite literally together.

Thor: The Dark World sets out its stall from the outset with breathless battle sequences depicting the fall of Malekith and his elf army and his loss of the Aether at his moment of glory, sending him into a self-imposed exile as he regathers his strength, followed by Thor's titanic struggles to save the realm of Vanaheim from invaders. Fortunately the film quickly finds its sense of fun as we're taken back to Earth to see Jane playing the dating game (a glorious cameo from Chris O'Dowd) and, right across the spectacle and adventure which follows, it never really loses its sense of fun. The script, driven by newcomer Alan Taylor's zesty, enthusiastic direction, finds the perfect balance, leavening potentially heavy Asgardian God-stomping with zippy one-liners and neat visual gags (Thor considerably hanging Mjolnir on a handy hatpeg in Jane's flat being a particular favourite). But where *Iron Man* tends to get its humour just from Robert Downey Jnr, here everyone gets a look in and the chance to let a bit of light into the drama; from Stellan Skarsgard's Erik Selvig and his determination to remain trouserless, to Loki trading whip-crack witticisms with the more

stoic and square-jawed Thor. And of course it's the relationship between Thor and Loki (and the growing bond between Thor and Jane) which underpins the movie despite all the chaos, carnage and good-natured (or maybe that should be God-natured?) comedy; they hate and distrust each other but ultimately they have to stand and fight side by side in the name of the greater good. And it's one Hell of a fight, from Malekith's Ark vessel ploughing into Asgard itself, laser-blasting soldiers chasing Thor and his group fleeing the stunningly-realised realm of Asgard on a zippy *Stars Wars*-like skimmer, to the apocalyptic finale in Greenwich which does for London what *The Avengers* did for New York.

Some may sniff at the general perfunctoriness of the plot which basically entails a big super-powered God/baddy (Eccleston missing much of the fun in an unavoidably one-note role) trying to lay his hands on an awesome weapon which will give him ultimate power. There's also much convenient scientific mumbo-jumbo which is pretty much a Macguffin to allow characters to leap handily across space and between worlds (itself leading to a couple of tasty gags). But the guts of the story serves not only to add flesh to the Thor/Loki dynamic but to strengthen Thor's bonds to humanity and point him in the general direction of his true destiny. The obligatory cameos and codas are all present and correct from one hilarious in-movie sequence (and we're not talking the inevitable appearance by Stan 'The Man' Lee) to two post-credits codas, one of which suggests a weird and wonderful Marvel movie yet to come.

The Dark World plays with an infectious joy, charm and energy which can only have been generated by the success of the *Avengers* movie, allowing the *Thor* team to craft this thrilling, dynamic and occasionally laugh out loud sequel that sets a new bar for the cinematic superhero genre.

Paul Mount

EXPECTED 9
ACTUAL 10



WOLF CHILDREN

Cert: PG / **Director:** Mamoru Hosoda / **Screenplay:** Mamoru Hosoda, Satoko Okudera / **Starring:** Kumiko Aso, Yukito Nishii, Haru Kuroki / **Release Date:** Out Now

It's the old story. Girls meets boy. Boy turns out to be a wolf. Boy and girl get together and have cubs. Then boy drowns in a canal and is dumped by his tail into a black bin liner. What's a girl to do – except, perhaps, go on *The Jeremy Kyle Show*?

Answer: move to the country. And this is what Hana, the heroine of *Wolf Children*, does, settling into a crumbling, *My Neighbour Totoro*-style house in the sticks with her two shape-shifting kids, Yuki and Ame, after the untimely death of their father. Yuki, a boisterous little girl, loves the change of locale, but Ame, her timid younger brother, is far less keen. However, as the years roll by and one learns more about being a human while the other learns more about being a wolf, their roles slowly reverse: now it's Ame who feels the call of the wild and Yuki who feels the call of, y'know, having a boyfriend and hanging out with her besties at school. But can the children control the two sides of their nature, or will they end

up tearing the family apart in a flurry of flying fur?

Wolf Children begins in unpromisingly mawkish fashion. The bits where Hana and her bloke play happy families in a cramped starter flat are too twee for words, and that whole section looks slightly cheap too, the simplistic character designs not gelling at all well with environments cluttered with washing machines, rice cookers and electric heaters. However, things buck up considerably once the shift to Totoro-land is made. There's an enjoyable sequence where Hana learns the ins and outs of farming from her grumpy but kindly neighbours, and the kids become more interesting as they grow up and achieve self-awareness.

The animation budget seems to be stacked towards these latter stages too – witness the exhilarating scene where Ame, in wolf form, explores the mountains above his home with an animal that has become his mentor, and a powerful, climactic

storm sequence full of rushing cloud, pelting rain and swirling foliage. Stick with it and *Wolf Children* eventually rewards your patience, but there's no doubt that it gets off to an iffy start and that it could have done with taking itself a little less seriously – after all, it's hard not to smirk knowingly at these lupine shenanigans in this

post-*Twilight* age. Still, you've got to love a film that takes time away from the drama to teach you how to grow potatoes.

Julian White

EXPECTED ★★★★★★ B

ACTUAL ★★★★★★ E



DVD + BLU-RAY REVIEWS



THE HOBBIT - AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY EXTENDED EDITION

DVD + BD / Cert: 12A / Director: Peter Jackson / Screenplay: Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens, Peter Jackson, Guillermo del Toro / Starring: Martin Freeman, Ian McKellen, Richard Armitage, Ken Stott, Graham McTavish, William Kircher, James Nesbitt, Stephen Hunter / Release Date: Out Now

Given the enormous success of the *Rings* trilogy, a follow-up was inevitable and of course it had to be *The Hobbit - An Unexpected Journey*. The story of the young hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, being dragged into the most dangerous adventures by the wandering wizard Gandalf the Grey and a team of dwarves is considered a classic by most, and this is the first time an attempt has been made to tell the story as a proper, big-budget, Hollywood feature. The result is a star-studded, lavishly produced movie, filled with action, excitement and breathtaking scenery, as well as the odd song or two. And to many people's surprise, this slim book has been stretched out into a trilogy.

Splitting the story into three movies looks like it will pay off. Jackson has combed through the original text of both *The Hobbit* and the *LotR* books in

order to create a complete world and tell the full story. The lack of the rights to the rest of the Tolkien estate does lead to some nice work-arounds, but overall we have a deep fantasy action movie that, though it takes a while to start, gathers momentum and does not stop until the end.

Despite all of the production and legal difficulties that led to it taking over a decade for the *LotR* prequel to be made, it's now hard to imagine *The Hobbit - An Unexpected Journey* being made by anyone but Peter Jackson. The visual references from the previous movies and the amazing sense of consistency and all-round feel to the feature could have only been achieved through Jackson's dedication and attention to detail. Still, the fingerprints of the previous director, Guillermo del Toro, can be seen in more than one or two scenes.

The Hobbit - An Unexpected Journey Extended Edition includes added scenes which are interesting, but neither add to or take away anything from the quality of the piece. In most cases you can see why they were cut from the original list, as 13 minutes is a lot of extra footage. The Goblin King's song and dance number is especially interesting, and though it works and is quite amusing, it does stretch the movie out a little bit too much and gets in the way of one of the movie's significant set-pieces, the riddles in the dark.

The commentary is very good. Director Peter Jackson and screenwriter Philippa Boyens are both blessed with an engaging manner and as you would expect, they provide fascinating insights into the production of the movie. It's interesting to hear them talk about scenes that have been left out of the extended version, and the

reasons why. Boyens is especially fascinating; as screenwriter she's well aware of the difference between Tolkien's original text and what happens in the movie, and she takes the time to explain how and why the changes had to be made. This feature is also packed with all sorts of nice trivia and tantalising hints as to what the next two movies will be like.

The extras are vast and very well done. The *New Zealand: Home of Middle-earth* feature does feel more like an advert for New Zealand, but the appendixes are marvelous. *The Company of Thorin* gives the viewer a real feel for what it takes to bring dwarves to life and has some great little touches and insights, and include a comedy '70s style movie trailer that will bring a big grin to your face, as will Peter Jackson's pet name for the dwarves. Bilbo/Martin Freeman gets his own feature in *The 14th Member*, and it's charming to see the process that made Bilbo appear so utterly enchanting on the screen. The bulk of the features walk the viewer through the ins and outs of the production, from the initial proposal and associated issues, to the set design and special effects. It's in-depth, but also inspirational.

Including features, the set is over 12 hours long, which should keep most fans going for some time, or at least keep you distracted on a long flight to New Zealand. The second part of *The Hobbit* series, *The Desolation of Smaug* will be out in early December, so if you need to revise the events of the last movie, now would be the time to pick this collection up and get yourself ready for part two.

Extras: See above

Ed Fortune

RATING ++++++ 8



UNIDENTIFIED

DVD / Cert: 15 / Director: Jason Richard Miller / Screenplay: Jason Richard Miller, Eddie Mui, Parry Shen / Starring: Parry Shen, Colton Dunn, Eddie Mui / Release Date: Out Now

Brace yourself for a sci-fi found footage cross between *The Hangover* and *The Fourth Kind*. After getting on the wrong side of a local loan shark, a group of bickering friends flee into the Nevada desert, where they are subsequently beset by a very different kind of threat. Unfortunately for everyone, one of their number is Jodie (Artell), perhaps the most irritating character ever to populate a found footage film.

And there's plenty of competition in that department. For some reason, the characters in found footage horror films always tend to be awful people, from the vindictive brats of *Cannibal*

Holocaust, to *Unidentified's* Jodie. These characters are the cinematic representation of those friends we all have, who remain glued to their mobile phones at a night down the pub, or house party. It's another peculiarity of this subgenre that we rarely get the payoff of seeing these terrible, terrible people die on screen – after all, once they're dead, who's left to hold the camera? It's little wonder that Jodie's friends are constantly trying to ditch him.

At least one of those friends is played by Parry Shen, who is as likeable here as he was in each *Hatchet* film, which distracts us from the tiresome company he keeps. We should be relieved that we have this anchor, however flimsy, since it takes far too long for any other reason to watch this film to appear. Again, as with so many other found footage nightmares, there's so much build-up and not nearly enough of the main event. Shen or no Shen, it means suffering through fifty minutes of Las Vegas 'antics' before anything starts happening. "Why are you still filming?" Good question. Please stop. *Unidentified* is so

found footage that there's even a scene in which the characters watch footage recorded on an iPhone through the lens of their video camera. It consists mostly of Jodie singing about taking a piss, when he's not taking the piss. The switch from comedy to horror is an awkward one, coming too late in the game to work as it should. The bulk of the action – sorry, no little green men or drooling xenomorphs to see here – consists, as it always seems to do, of panicked snotty faces running around in the darkness until it's time for the credits to roll.

There is merit to this increasingly popular subgenre of horror, but there's very little of it to be found here. While it's technically fine, and the action of the last quarter will please some, we found it to be dull, repetitive and more than a little annoying. *Unidentified* is a classic close encounter of the turd kind.

Extras: None

Joel Harley

RATING ★★★★★ 4



WONDERFALLS - THE COMPLETE SERIES

DVD / Cert: 12 / Director: Various / Screenplay: Various / Starring: Caroline Dhavernas, Katie Finneran, Tyron Leitso, Lee Pace, William Sadler / Release Date: Out Now

Here at Starburst we like a quirky TV series – sometimes the quirkiest the better. Case in point: *Wonderfalls*, a deliciously eccentric US comedy/drama/whatever-you-like from 2004 which ran for just 13 episodes (but found itself ignominiously cancelled after just four had been broadcast), only now finding its way onto DVD in the UK. It might take you an episode or three to find its rhythm but it's a series which quickly works its very peculiar magic and by the end of the thirteenth episode you'll feel

wretched at the realisation that there's no more to come.

Created by Bryan Fuller (who would go on to produce the equally perverse cult hits *Dead Like Me* and *Pushing Daisies*) *Wonderfalls* starred Caroline Dhavernas (now appearing in Fuller's current hit *Hannibal*) playing twenty-four year old graduate Jaye Tyler who's wasting her life in a mundane job at the Wonderfalls souvenir shop near Niagara Falls. Self-obsessed and moody, Jaye finds her life changing when inanimate

objects – usually depictions of dumb animals in the form of wax figurines, cow creamers or apron illustrations – start to talk to her, delivering messages which send her off on unusual escapades in which she finds herself reluctantly helping people to change their lives or rectify past mistakes. Whilst all around her – her larger-than-life family, her best friend Mahandra and Eric the bartender – are baffled by her increasingly-erratic behaviour, Jaye's jumping through hoops, hopelessly compelled to obey the instructions of her lifeless 'muses'.

Like most of Fuller's shows there's an extreme air of heightened reality about *Wonderfalls*, a sense that we're watching stories being told in a world which is a bit like our own but also quite a lot different. *Wonderfalls* is so refreshing – especially nearly ten years on – because it's not an action show, there's no jeopardy and the closest it gets to a story arc is the will they/won't they relationship between Jaye and Eric. Wittily written and packed with broad performances and snappy, inventive direction, the show's stories are resolutely

low-key affairs; Jaye helps a guy on an extreme diet regain his sense of self-esteem; she helps put right an injustice regarding the first (and only) woman to go over the Falls in a barrel; she helps a lost mail-order Russian bride whose prospective husband turns out to be a thirteen year-old boy.

Delightfully-engaging and off-beat, in truth it's hard to see how *Wonderfalls* could ever have been anything more than a one-season... er... wonder; the potentially short-lived novelty of its central premise seems to give the show its own in-built obsolescence. In reality *Wonderfalls* was always too wacky to live but at least now its European fans can take solace from this well-presented three-disc boxset which will forever commemorate the weird wonder of *Wonderfalls*.

Extras: Commentaries, 'Greetings from Wonderfalls' documentary, visual FX featurette.

Paul Mount

RATING ★★★★★★ 8



THANATOMORPHOSE

DVD / Cert: 18 / Director: Eric Falardeau / Screenplay: Eric Falardeau / Starring: Kayden Rose, Davyd Tousignant, Emile Beaudry / Release Date: November 15th

Reminiscent of New French Extremity films like *Inside* and *In My Skin*, *Thanatomorphose* takes its title from the French term for the visible signs of an organism's decomposition caused by death. That pretty much sums up the plot: alienated young sculptress, Laura (Rose) moves into a Montreal apartment where she spends her time suffering in an abusive relationship with her boyfriend, Antoine (Tousignant), and feeling equally rejected by the

artistic establishment who refuse her an arts grant. She is dying inside (literally). One morning she wakes up to find her body slowly and inexorably starting to decay.

Inspired by a mix of Cronenberg, Jorg Buttgerit and Kierkegaard, Falardeau has crafted a slow but extremely powerful and deeply disturbing vision of a woman's inner hell that eventually rots her body as well as her soul and sends her plummeting into the abyss. What begins as a few

bruises gradually deteriorates into a severe case of necrotising fasciitis, and Laura locks herself in her apartment in an attempt to control and finally come to terms with what is happening to her. All this is presented in bravura manner by special make up effects artist David Scherer, who, like Falardeau and DP Benoit Lemire, pulls off extraordinary things (literally) on a tiny budget.

Thanatomorphose is tight, claustrophobic and starkly realised. Taking place entirely within the confines of Laura's apartment, it owes more than a little to Polanski's *Repulsion*, and like that film wears its sexual politics admirably on its sleeve. "I thought you loved me! I'm just a cheap fuck!" the blackened, rotted Laura screams at Antoine as he deigns to come visit her during the advanced stages of her illness. But if Laura's frenzied attacks on Antoine and other intruders veer into the more predictable territory of *Repulsion*'s murder sequences, *Thanatomorphose* remains true to its own thesis throughout: unlike the Catherine Deneuve character in Polanski's film, Laura directs

her disgust not so much at the men around her as at herself. "It is a film about the body as an object", Falardeau has observed, "a commodity". Laura's plight is horrific, repulsive and ultimately tragic as her flesh increasingly betrays her and provides none of the comfort she desperately craves.

With its minimalist narrative, abstract video sequences and funereal score, *Thanatomorphose* may be a little too avant-garde for some tastes (essentially it's an underground movie – in the best sense – with all the trappings that experimental 'psychodrama' entails), and hypochondriacs are well-advised to avoid this one. But if you're into existential body horror you will be impressed. This may be the most cerebral low budget feature debut since Christopher Nolan's *Following*.

Extras: Two short films by the director / Behind-the-scenes feature / Trailer

Jon Towlson

RATING ★★★★★★★ 7



THE CASEBOOK OF EDDIE BREWER

DVD + BD / Cert: 15 / Director: Andrew Spencer / Screenplay: Andrew Spencer / Starring: Ian Brooker, Peter White / Release Date: Out Now

Harking back to the classic ghost story of M.R. James, *The Case Book of Eddie Brewer* is a quietly haunting character study based loosely on the true life parapsychologist Maurice Grosse, who investigated the case of the Enfield Poltergeist, an apparently genuine incidence of

paranormal activity that caused tabloid frenzy in the 1970s.

Ian Brooker plays the titular paranormal investigator, still troubled by the loss of his wife, who died in a car accident some 25 years earlier. The subject of a slightly scoffing TV documentary, Eddie is seen

as something of a novelty act by the film crew who follow him around and is derided by the sceptics and rivals in his own field, who denounce his methods as old school. But when Eddie investigates genuine paranormal phenomena at an old house, an all-night vigil becomes a matter of survival for Eddie and the film crew, and Eddie is forced to confront his darkest fears.

Filming in a surprisingly spooky Birmingham, using local talent, director Andrew Spencer fuses gritty social realism with supernatural horror to powerful effect: a fan of classic British horror films like *The Innocents* (1961) and *The Haunting* (1963), Spencer brings the same psychological ambiguity to *The Case Book of Eddie Brewer*. We're never quite sure whether the supernatural goings-on are real or ghostly manifestations of Eddie's tormented mind. Spencer is aided in this by sound designer Jamie Robertson who imbues the film with an eerie mood throughout. It's not quite, but

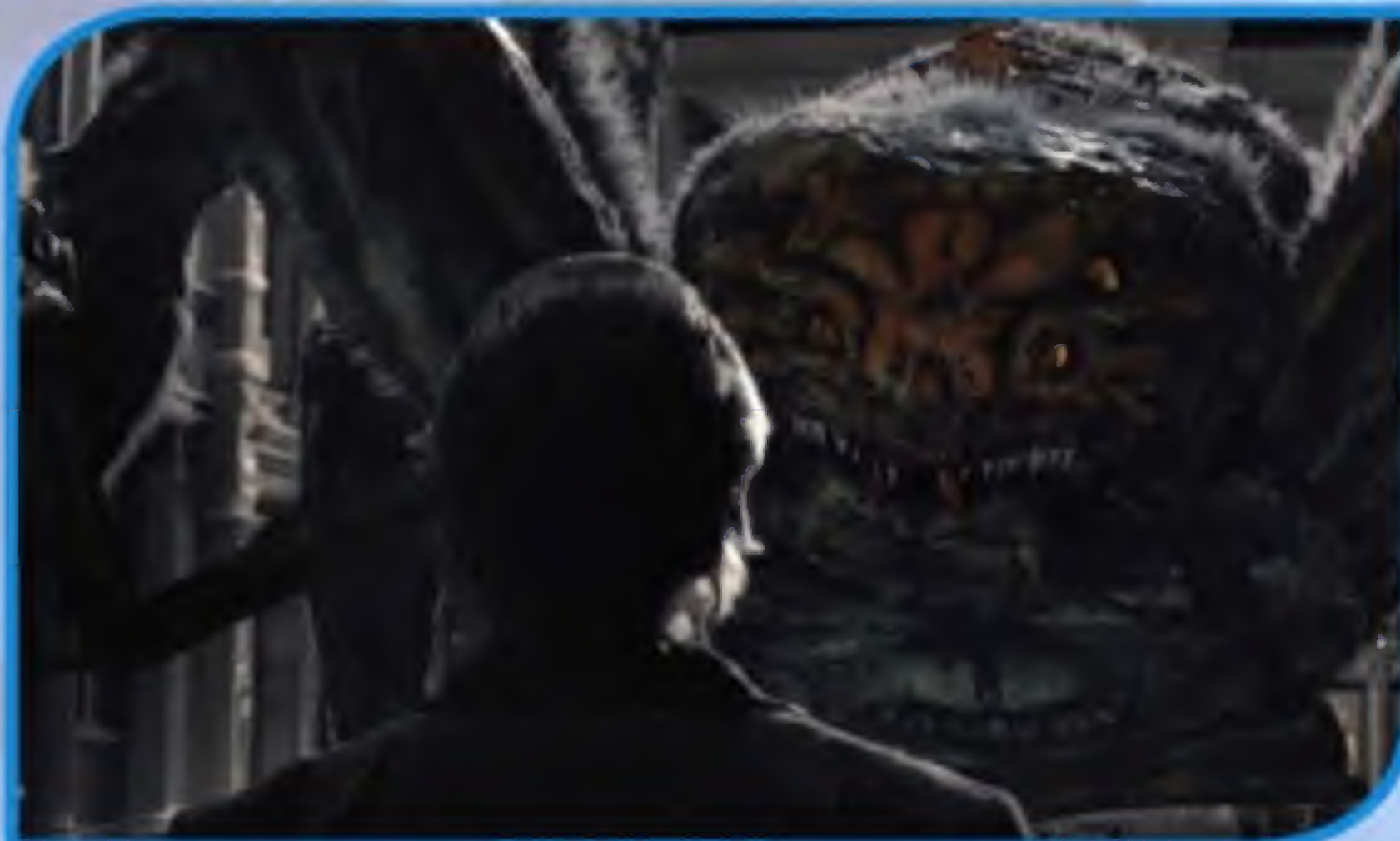
almost, *The Exorcist* directed by Ken Loach.

Brooker brings a quiet intensity to the role of the dedicated but disparaged Eddie, who gradually becomes unravelled over the course of his investigation. His scientific stoicism slowly peels away to reveal the terrible pain of loss so that we genuinely fear for Eddie – will he survive the inevitable showdown with the forces of darkness? Andrew Spencer's solid direction combines mock-documentary and 'fourth wall' drama that gives Eddie Brewer the feel of *Most Haunted* meets *The Stone Tape*, invoking the work of Nigel Kneale and Stephen Volk in its sense of slowly mounting dread, as normal life becomes threatened by the inexplicable. Fans of *Ghostwatch* and *Supernatural* will love it.

Extras: None

Jon Towlson

RATING ★★★★★★★ 8



SPIDERS 3D

DVD + BD / Cert: 15 / Director: Tibor Takacs / Screenplay: Joseph Farrugia, Tibor Takacs / Starring: Patrick Muldoon, Christa Campbell, William Hope / Release Date: Out Now

It's been a while since we've had a decent giant spider movie; there was a brief outbreak a few years ago with the likes of *Arachnophobia* and the underrated *Eight-Legged Freaks* and there have been numerous nasty straight-to-DVD efforts (yep, that's you, *Camel Spiders*) which were about as welcome as... well, an Autumn spider home invasion. But here they come again. As a

prelude to December's *Big Ass Spider* (honestly, go and look it up) here's a Nu Image TV movie which, as they say, does what it says on the tin. This film has spiders in it and, if you have the technology, you can watch it in 3D.

Debris from a Russian space station/research laboratory crashes to Earth, dumping its cargo of mutant spiders (DNA recovered

from a crashed spaceship spliced with that of our favourite eight-legged lovelies) in a New York underground tunnel. They start to grow and multiply and before long they're making their way up to the city streets and not even the combined might of nearly six soldiers can fight them off. Subway control chief Jason (Muldoon) and his scientist ex-wife Rachel (Campbell) are reunited – ahhh – as they try to save their teenage daughter who's trapped in her home in the quarantine zone.

Look, you don't care about the plot; you just want to know if the spider FX are any good. Yeah, they're not bad. They don't look a lot like your common-or-garden domestic spider – they're all different colours and they roar like lions – but that's explained away by the alien DNA plot device which allows them to do everything normal spiders do and a lot more. And let's face it, everyone's creeped out by spiders so they only need to be animated halfway decently for them to give us (i.e., this reviewer) the heebie-jeebies. To be fair, the talented Mr Takacs (previous credits: *Meteor*

Storm, *Megasnake*) has crafted a perfunctory, workmanlike story populated by zero-interest humans – the acting's terrible – and convincing-most-of-the-time scuttling spiders which leap on their victims who are variously ripped to bits and disembowelled. Eventually the big queen spider gets loose and the real low-budget carnage begins. There are some decent action sequences, especially a chase around a deserted storage warehouse, along with an explosive denouement and the inevitable promise/threat of a potential sequel.

Spiders 3D is inoffensive and rubbishy, yet can't help but provide a few cheap thrills. But if you're looking for a classier, crazier kind of spider movie, 1955's black-and-white *Tarantula* is still the one to watch. You can probably find it on the Web. [No, surely you didn't...? – Ed]

Extras: Making of / Cast interviews

Paul Mount

RATING ★★★★★ 5



RETURN TO SCATTERBROOK - MEMORIES OF WORZEL

DVD / Cert: E / Director: Derek Pykett / Screenplay: Derek Pykett / Starring: Jon Pertwee, Geoffrey Bayldon, Lorraine Chase / Release Date: Out Now

Kiddies back in the '70s who were fans of Jon Pertwee's dapper, dandyish Doctor must have had a bit of a shock when, for his next big TV role, he donned muddy rags, a straw wig and a turnip nose to play the part of the kindly scarecrow, Worzel Gummidge. But in fact, it was a chance for Pertwee to return to the sort of whiskery, comical grotesques that had been his bread and butter for years in *Carry On* films and

the like. And the show was a reasonable success, running for four series from 1979.

This documentary takes the viewer methodically through the development of *Worzel Gummidge* (from what was originally a film script by Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall, based on the children's novel by Barbara Euphan Todd), through the casting process, and then the happy days of location-shooting in Hampshire

in invariably sunny weather that became known to the cast and crew as "Worzel summers". We hear from some of the key behind-the-scenes talent and from several of the actors, including Lorraine Chase and the venerable Geoffrey Bayldon, and there's some rather blurry archive video of Pertwee being interviewed backstage in a dressing room with a quart bottle of whisky at his elbow. Sadly, there are no actual clips of the show, but the whole thing is enlivened with a wealth of continuity shots and design sketches.

Along the way, you pick up plenty of interesting nuggets – the fact, for instance, that the dog who played Ratter in the first series was replaced in the second one because its owners wanted too much money (and, we can only assume, all sorts of stringent riders about regular walkies and tummy ticklings and heaps of nice, chewy bones). Some of the actors' reminiscences go on a bit, but overall this is entertaining stuff.

There's also an interesting extra in the shape of a 16-minute home video recording from 1996 of Pertwee appearing in front of

an appreciative audience, sharing polished anecdotes of his theatrical forebears, his apprenticeship in variety and one very funny story about Roger Moore in rehearsals for the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical, *Aspects of Love*. Only a passing mention of *Who* and *Worzel Gummidge* though – you can't help but wonder whether the bits of the talk dealing with these topics, if they ever existed, have been flogged elsewhere. The picture quality here is actually pretty good. Elsewhere, variable audio tends to be the problem, with occasional off-screen noise, and Starburst found that the DVD wanted to play in a rather annoying windowbox aspect ratio. But with money raised from sales of the disc going to charity, it seems churlish to dwell on such flaws in what is otherwise a very worthwhile exercise in nostalgia.

Extras: An evening with Jon Pertwee / *Worzel* picture gallery

Julian White

RATING ★★★★★ 5



THE WITCHES (1966)

DVD + BD / Cert: 12 / Director: Cyril Frankel / Screenplay: Nigel Kneale / Starring: Joan Fontaine, Kay Walsh, Alec McCowen / Release Date: Out Now

Nigel Kneale is seen by many as the grandfather of British horror, and with scripts such as *The Quatermass Experiment* under his belt, you can see why. *The Witches* is one of his lesser known works, and rarely appears on the list of well-loved Hammer horror movies. However, a re-release has been long overdue, and this

painstakingly restored movie is certainly worth a look.

The plot is very typical of Kneale's work; an English school teacher has a run-in with the occult whilst on her travels in Africa, and returns back to sleepy old England to recover and re-energise herself. Of course, she happens to be staying in a quaint village filled with slightly odd locals, the sort of place that is beloved by British horror movies. A child falls ill and sinister workings are uncovered, and wackiness ensues.

Those used to in-your-face gore and shock horror will not find this feature very engaging; this is a gentle horror that builds tension over time. Much of the film's power relies on Joan Fontaine's strong performance as the school teacher; there's a significant conflict of classes here with the Woman's Institute-attending, cake-baking, middle-class school teacher being shocked by the common folk and their funny ways.

Given that this sort of slowly creeping horror has been superbly parodied by the likes of *The League of Gentlemen*, it is sometimes hard to take *The Witches* seriously,

especially during certain key scenes that are absurd rather than haunting. This is because viewing tastes and sensibilities have moved on, rather than due to any actual flaw in the original piece. Unlike *The Wicker Man* (which this film resembles in some ways) the sense of peril is simply not terribly convincing, and at points it's hard to be sympathetic for the protagonist. This version of the movie comes with a documentary called *Hammer Glamour* which is quite fun but doesn't really have any huge revelations for Hammer Horror fans.

If you happen to have not seen a film since 1967, or simply enjoy vintage horror movies and don't mind a slow and steady pace to your shocks, you might want to check this out. Those who demand a quicker pace and more action, however, should leave well alone.

Extras: *Hammer Glamour* featurette / Audio commentary

Ed Fortune

RATING ★★★★★★ 6



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES MOVIE COLLECTION

DVD + BD / Cert: PG / Director: Various / Screenplay: Various / Starring: Judith Hoag, Elias Koteas, Corey Feldman / Release Date: Out Now

Given the popularity of the cartoon and the original Turtles in the late '80s/early '90s, it's incredible to think that the first *Ninja Turtles* movie was independently made, with no major studio behind it. The film itself is actually quite a dark affair in comparison to the animated series, straddling the line between the cartoon and the original comics without fully being able to truly satisfy the fans of either. That's not to criticise the film, it's its own thing and is largely a success on those terms. First – and most importantly – the Turtles themselves look fantastic and most of the time you forget that they are

actually a bunch of performers in suits. The problem with them is that, with the exception of Raphael, there is very little about their characters to tell them apart.

Yes, the film is a little hokey in places and most of the dialogue is quite heavy-handed at times, but it has a charm that makes it an enjoyable blast from the past, one that (unlike many things you loved as a kid) actually holds up well.

Turtle Mania ensured that the first film was a success (it was the highest-grossing independent movie for a long time), so a sequel was a certainty, and in 1991 *Secret of the Ooze* was released. Most of the cast changed for this outing – most notably Paige Turco taking over from Judith Hoag as April O'Neil – and in response to complaints from parents regarding the tone of the first film, *Ooze* tilts its tone more toward a younger audience, with varying results.

As such, the Turtles no longer use their weapons when fighting, instead employing whatever object is close to hand that most resembles the weapon they are carrying on their shells. While this

adds some extra comedy slapstick to their fights, most of it will leave anyone over the age of ten cold. It's an enjoyable enough film, but lacks the charm of the first one.

Rounding out the set is the third in the series and it's safe to say that it's the weakest of the *Turtles* films to date. It actually has a pretty interesting story idea and sees the return of Elias Koteas as Casey Jones, but the whole thing just looks cheap in comparison to the first two.

The Blu-ray transfer is pretty good for the most part, although it probably isn't much better than an upscaled DVD version of the film. The set could've done with some descent retrospective documentaries on the making of the films and Turtle Mania in general. Instead all you get is a short featurette (made for *Ooze*), some trailers and galleries.

Extras: 30-min "making of" featurette / Promotional Trailers / Stills gallery

Stuart Mulrain

RATING ★★★★★★ 7



THE FURY (1978)

BD / Cert: 18 / Director: Brian De Palma / Screenplay: John Farris / Starring: Kirk Douglas, John Cassavetes, Carrie Snodgrass, Charles Durning / Release Date: Out Now

Kirk Douglas, bless his dimple, was really too old at 62 to play the swimming trunk wearing hero of Brian de Palma's *The Fury*, his telekinetic 1978 follow-up to the similarly-themed classic *Carrie* (1976). But, 35 years on, an old man in his pants is just one of *The Fury*'s problems...

Kirk plays Peter Sandza, whose son Robin (Stevens) is taken into the care of duplicitous family

friend Ben Childress (Cassavetes) after a holiday resort shoot-out orchestrated by Childress to convince Robin that Dad is dead. Robin, possessed of extraordinary psychic abilities, is drafted to carry out secret experiments designed to weaponise psychics. Meanwhile Gillian (Irving) also possesses abilities including ESP and telekinesis and people she touches have the unfortunate tendency

to start bleeding profusely. Attending the Paragon Clinic for help in learning how to control her talents, Gillian finds that she is in tune with Robin's abilities and helps Peter track down his missing son. But nearly a year has passed and Robin has changed into a powerful, dangerous young man.

The Fury's two storylines – which converge in an explosive and memorable finale – conspire to make the film a slightly schizophrenic experience. It's also a slightly dull and plodding one; neither story is told with much energy and the film, steeped in the traditions and styles of post-Watergate American thrillers, never seems to get out of first gear or find any sort of momentum. Much of Kirk's storyline is characterised by extraordinary and illogical incident and Gillian's marginally more interesting arc just revisits ground De Palma had already covered to better and more horrific effect in *Carrie*. But then *The Fury* isn't really a horror film per se and as a more conventional thriller it gives De Palma the opportunity to demonstrate some impressive stylistic touches,

including a particularly effective slow motion foot chase sequence, some disorientating bird's eye views and slow, dramatic tracking shots. But when the fractured and meandering narrative starts to come together *The Fury* belatedly finds its feet and there's no denying that Cassavetes' lovingly filmed death sequence ends the film with a very literal bang.

The Fury is very much a creature of its time, a worthy but heavy-going 1970s pseudo-conspiracy theory thriller struggling to come to terms with its supernatural affectations. Aficionados will, however, appreciate Arrow's brilliant restoration and its slew of comprehensive bonus material.

Extras: Interview with cinematographer Richard H Kline / Fiona Lewis interview / Location Journal feature / Archive interviews / De Palma film tribute / Production images / Commemorative booklet

Paul Mount

ACTUAL ★★★★★★ 6



DR. MABUSE, THE GAMBLER (1922)

DVD + BD / Cert: PG / Director: Fritz Lang / Screenplay: Fritz Lang, Thea von Harbou / Starring: Rudolf Klein-Rogge, Aud Egede-Nissen / Release Date: Out Now

First up, *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler*, aka *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler*, is a film that you really have to make time for. Fritz Lang's 1922 classic is split over two parts, with a total running time of nearly four and a half hours. That's a major commitment for any film fan, but some may struggle even further with the film being a silent movie. That said, those that don't

have a problem with the running time, or those that take enjoyment from silent movies, will find *Dr. Mabuse* a remarkably rewarding viewing experience.

Based on a novel by Norbert Jacques, the film focuses on the titular Dr. Mabuse (Klein-Rogge). Part criminal overlord, part mob boss, part master of disguise, Mabuse is a piece of

work. Remarkably slick for the time, the film, despite the intimidating length, flies by. Fantastic storytelling, chillingly effective camera work, stellar performances, and attention-monopolising charisma means you can't help but be drawn in by *Dr. Mabuse*. Adding to the pace and fluidity of the film is the glossy, stylised way that Mabuse pulls off various cons and misdemeanors throughout. All is seemingly perfect in the world of Dr. Mabuse, until he comes up against the determined Inspector Wenk (Goetzke).

Dr. Mabuse is a film that is far, far ahead of its time. Considering it was created in the early 1920s, you get to see such depth of story; so many different arcs, twists, and styles. There are elements of spy films, psychologically disturbing films, whodunit films, chase films, and detective dramas. On top of these elements, the movie also has some interesting symbolism in place, with emphasis on the economic and social pressures of 1920s Berlin.

In terms of techniques, the film was again a pioneer. The

brilliant Blu-ray transfer and beautiful scoring adds to the playfully dark, manipulative tale of Dr. Mabuse and his treachery and aids the feel of the movie. This new transfer brings a nostalgic, warm crispness to the film, and it gives you a real appreciation for all of the performances on show, particularly Klein-Rogge's charismatically deceptive Mabuse.

If a four and a half hour film is not enough to appease your appetite, do not fear. In this new release, we also get treated to a bucket-load of extras, including new additional subtitles, a greatly insightful chatter track from Lang expert David Kalat, and some nice retrospective featurettes. For fans of *Dr. Mabuse*, Fritz Lang or any of Lang's other works, such as *Metropolis*, this newly restored edition of a true classic is a must own.

Extras: Audio commentary by David Kalat / Three extensive featurettes / 32-page booklet

Andrew Pollard

RATING ★★★★★★★★ 9



RAPTURE-PALOOZA

DVD + BD / Cert: 15 / Director: Paul Middleditch / Screenplay: Chris Matheson / Starring: Anna Kendrick, Craig Robinson, John Francis Daley, Rob Corddry / Release Date: Out Now

After the rapture where all the pious souls were sublimated to heaven, Lindsey and her boyfriend Ben are left with the rest of the unworthy on an Earth where the Antichrist – an arrogant politician named Earl – has risen. When he encounters Lindsey and it's lust at first sight, she and Ben decide that something needs to be done about him.

The 2012 resurgence of the Armageddon-themed films spurred by the misunderstood significance of the end of the latest

Mesoamerican calendar cycle has now continued almost a year past the world's supposed expiry date. Apocalyptic comedy seems the trend's direction, with *This Is The End* and *The World's End* setting a high bar for others to follow. Sadly, despite the number of usually reliable names attached to it, *Rapture-Palooza* falls far short.

The film suffers mostly in the limited scope of its story. The first part is a look at life in the post-rapture world narrated by Lindsey in sardonic fashion,

accompanied by some postmodern deconstruction of the somewhat arbitrary nature of the plagues and torments forewarned by the Book of Revelation. It must be said, though, that CGI locusts popping up to proclaim "Suffer!" in chipmunk voices or murders of crows incessantly taunting people with juvenile swearing is kind of amusing. However, it's a little directionless and it's only when the Antichrist is introduced into the story, what little there actually is of it, that it gets properly underway. However, he turns out to be less the evil-spreading cornerstone of the Unholy Trinity, and something more akin to an overgrown frat boy who believes everything is his right just because he wants it. He provokes contempt rather than fear, and is so utterly unthreatening that it's completely unconvincing how terrified everyone is supposed to be of him. It's a similar scale to being polite to your dad's boss who happens to be a bit of a twat.

It's criminal that the last five years haven't made Anna Kendrick a bigger star. An Oscar nomination and a string of diverse roles showcasing a broad range should have put her on more

peoples' radar, yet she continues to drift just shy of stardom. Her talent for deadpan sarcasm seen in the likes of *Pitch Perfect* and *Scott Pilgrim* informs much of Lindsey's character, convincing as someone who could genuinely be completely unfazed by periodic meteor storms or monsoons of blood. Craig Robertson as The Beast (as he insists on being called) is usually an understated comedic constant, but here has little more to work with than unsubtle innuendo and dick jokes. When you consider that the scriptwriter Chris Matheson was the guy who gave us *Bill & Ted*, it's enough to make you weep.

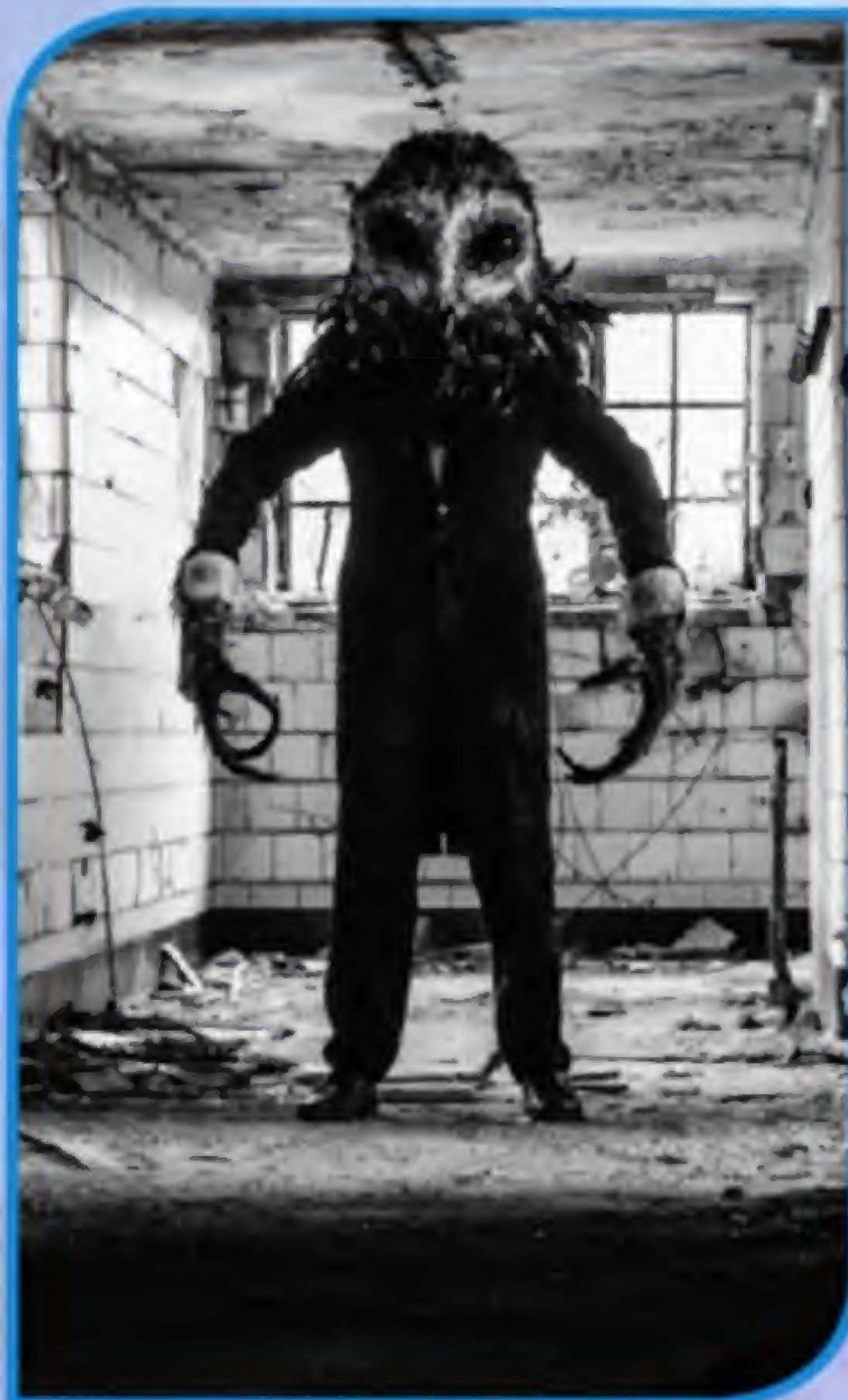
While the principal joke of an Antichrist who is more annoying than terrifying is an interesting one, a villain you can't take seriously is not a proper antagonist, just an irritation whose removal comes down to whoever could actually be bothered doing it.

Extras: Audio Commentary / It's Good to Be the Beast / Deleted Scenes / Gag Reel

Andrew Marshall

RATING ★★★★★ 5

ALSO RELEASED...



Lord of Tears (TBC)

RATING ★★★★★ 8

Despicable Me 2 (U).....

RATING ★★★★★ 8

A Magnificent Haunting (15).....

RATING ★★★★★ 8

World War Z (15).....

RATING ★★★★★ 8

The Headless Ghost (1959) (PG).....

RATING ★★★★★ 4

Classic Ghost Stories (12).....

RATING ★★★★★ 9

Robin Redbreast (1970) (12).....

RATING ★★★★★ 6

Dead of Night (1972) (15).....

RATING ★★★★★ 5

The Cloth (15).....

RATING ★★★★★ 1

K-On! The Movie (PG).....

RATING ★★★★★ 7

Pacific Rim (12).....

RATING ★★★★★ 7

Operation Condor: Armour of God II (15).....

RATING ★★★★★ 7

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BOOK

WORMHOLE

a monthly pick
of Genre Fiction
by Kate Fathers



Everyone has heard of *The Nutcracker*. No matter how old you are, whether you've seen the ballet or not, you can recognise the music from when it's been played ad nauseum at Christmas and you know that there exists a sugar plum fairy, even if you aren't quite sure what it looks like.

But what you might not know is that the story didn't spring from Tchaikovsky's mind, and is in actuality an adaptation of a story written in 1816 by ETA Hoffmann: *The Nutcracker and The Mouse King*.

The story opens on Christmas Eve, where Marie Stahlbaum and her siblings

Fritz and Luise are opening their presents. There are dolls and toy soldiers and beautiful dresses, but what captures Marie's attention is a Nutcracker with a wooden cape. But the Nutcracker isn't just an ordinary toy, and that night when everyone else has gone to sleep it springs to life to fight the seven-headed Mouse King, entangling Marie in an adventure that will ultimately change her life.

The story is, really, a fairy tale. The nineteenth century was a popular time for them, giving us two of the most well-known collections: *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and the stories of Hans Christian Andersen. *The*

Nutcracker and The Mouse King isn't counted among them, but it contains so many fairy tale tropes that I'm inclined to believe that Hoffmann was writing one. He uses repetition of both words and actions, and he has his magical characters speak in rhyme. He also makes use of the number three, which is a very powerful fairy tale number. In fairy tales there are usually three siblings, with the third—the youngest—being the protagonist. When something happens three times it constitutes a pattern, and the number three represents the beginning, middle and end. Marie is the third and youngest child in her family, and she goes through three transformative events: the battle, the sacrificing of her toys to the Mouse King, and her trip to the Kingdom of Dolls. You could argue that the very end of the story is a fourth transformation, but I found that Marie's internal change as a character had ended by that point, and the conclusion of the story was just a continuation of the third transformation. Like many fairy tale heroes, Marie has to go through trials in which she grows and is better able to accept and appreciate the conclusion that her story gives her, and to prepare her for the story's ultimate transformation: the breaking of the Nutcracker's curse.

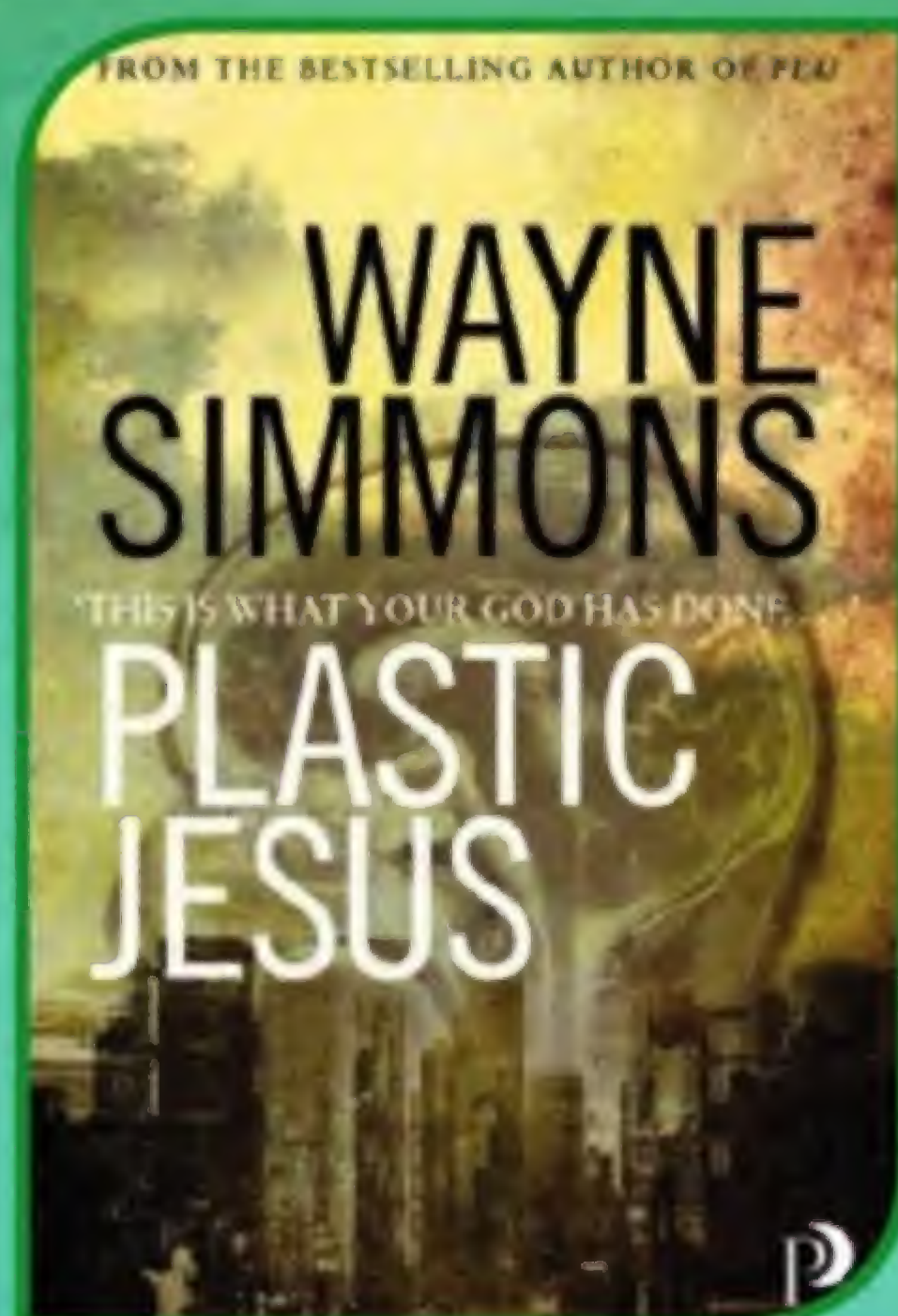
Speaking of the conclusion, I wasn't quite sure what to make of it. For the most part I took the story to be completely real, rather than a product of Marie's wild imagination as her parents insisted. By the end of the story, however, I wasn't so certain. Marie's ending is, as happens in many fairy tales, a romantic one that ends in a marriage, which given that by the end of the story she is eight-years-old is a bit hard for my twenty-first

century sensibilities to believe. Is Marie's age, then, supposed to be an indicator that this is all happening in her mind? Or are we to forget how young she is, and just accept that her parents come to believe in the fantastical, and approve of their young daughter's marriage and move to live in the Kingdom of Dolls? I'm still not quite sure.

Dodgy endings aside, it is a wonderful little story. It is written in light prose, devoid of extraneous details, and is beautifully structured. My version (2007 Penguin edition) also came paired with *The Tale of the Nutcracker*, a reworking of the story by Alexandre Dumas written in 1845. Dumas' version is where the ballet took most of its inspiration, although the difference between the two stories is minimal. Dumas' version is longer, the prose more verbose and the structure not quite as streamlined, and I'd even go so far as to say that *The Tale of the Nutcracker* reads more like a first draft, written in one sitting and published unedited. I might sound a bit harsh, but Hoffmann's story is just perfect, and I can't quite fathom why Dumas thought another version was required. Regardless, I did appreciate having the story anyway, if only to see precisely what captured Tchaikovsky's attention and to gain a further admiration of Hoffmann's original tale.

If you're looking for some Christmas-themed genre reading, then *The Nutcracker and The Mouse King* is what you're after. It would make a perfect children's bedtime story or something to read on Christmas Eve, curled up in front of the fireplace (or the fireplace screensaver on your computer). I know it got me in the spirit of the season, and I hope it does the same for you.





PLASTIC JESUS

Author: Wayne Simmons
Publisher: Salt Publishing
Release Date: November 15th

Up until now, Belfast-born Wayne Simmons has been diligently working his way up the ladder, steadily building his reputation as an established blogger, columnist and horror

author with novels like *Flu*, *Fever*, *Drop Dead Gorgeous* and *Doll Parts* to his name. Now, he steps out of his blood-splattered comfort zone and makes an indelible mark on the sci-fi genre with his first foray into the world of cyberpunk.

Plastic Jesus is an unrelenting look at the near future. Simmons skilfully comments on the current state of society and without stretching credibility, manages to give us a peek at where we may be headed. Believe us, the view isn't a particularly inviting one but what it does is provide a stunningly realistic and relatable backdrop for a story that's as gritty and violent as it is intriguing.

In the aftermath of a Holy War, the face of the Earth has changed. Continents have realigned. Maalside, which was once part of the US, is now in the middle of the Pacific far, far away from the mother country. It's capital is Lark City and to quote from another sci-fi icon: "*You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy.*"

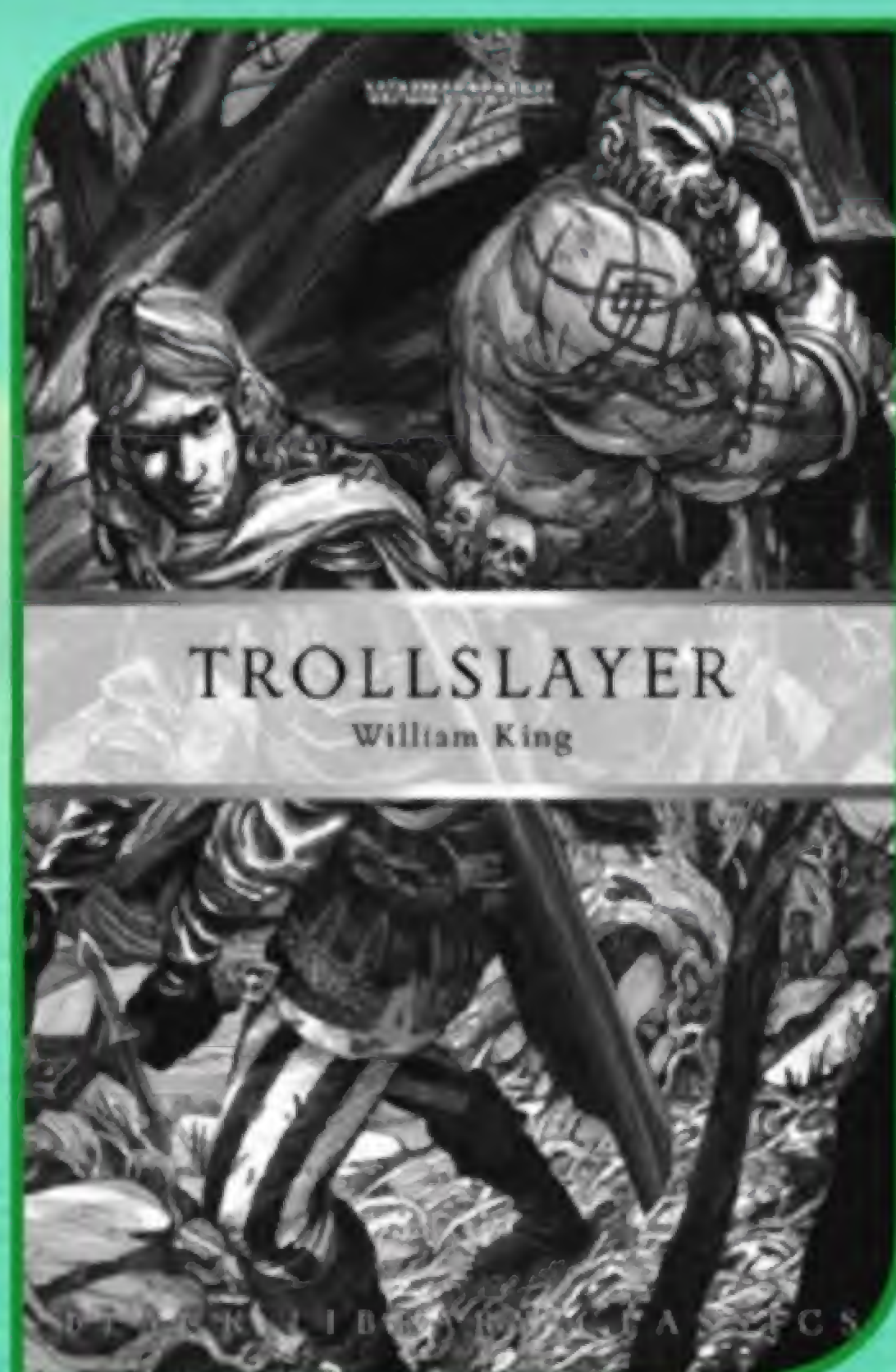
Drugs, prostitution, murder and protection are all part of the daily routine in this underbelly of civilisation. The inhabitants escape the daily drudge and seediness by using VR – an addictive set-up where your brain is directly plugged into an invasive virtual reality program – and watching TV shows which seem vaguely familiar but taken to an extreme.

However, the company running the VR setup intends to rebrand religion to cater for the disillusioned masses and approach Johnny Lyon to create and write a virtual Jesus. At its launch, VR Jesus is an overwhelming success, and offers comfort where comfort is needed. The trouble is, the program begins to evolve beyond the boundaries of its concept and soon becomes impossible to shut down. Just as man has created his own heaven, hell is sure to follow as the corrupt program causes chaos and a complete breakdown of the social order out on the streets.

Simmons is a gifted writer who not only spins a tightly plotted yarn that the reader finds hard to put down, but he also crafts realistic characters with flaws we can identify with, sucking the reader even deeper into the twisted pseudo-reality created in the recesses of Simmons' imagination. Given the depth of the story here and the dexterity that Simmons displays in wrapping a gripping yarn around an audacious concept, it's stunning that this is his first cyberpunk novel. We can only hope that it won't be his last. Wayne Simmons is a true British talent we can be proud of.

Robin Pierce

RATING ★★★★★★★ 8



TROLLSLAYER

Author: William King
Publisher: Black Library
Release Date: Out Now

One of three titles Black Library is re-releasing under its new Classics range, William King's *Trollslayer* recounts the efforts of disgraced slayer Gotrek Gurnisson to find an honourable death. Thanks to a drunken oath, poet Felix Jaeger is forced to follow and record his fate as they combat orcs, trolls and the cultists of the dark gods. Unfortunately for both of them, Gotrek is extremely hard to kill.

King went on to write another six books, but this first instalment remains one of the strongest in the series. Along with striking a good balance between the darkness of the setting and high adventure, it's one of the few which feels as if the duo are constantly on the move. Whereas other books are centred on single cities or enemies, *Trollslayer* is a constantly changing anthology of short tales as they move through the Empire. While the tales are smaller scale, they offer much more variety of foes. As such the book never feels as if it's dragging and is more appropriate for the initial premise of a questing warrior.

The two are depicted fighting their way through many environments and settings, each requiring different strategies – a siege war, an effort to protect a cursed noble family, a raid upon a fallen city, an assault upon a cult. The pacing of each of these is well handled, and while King doesn't offer the most descriptive of writing, his prose nonetheless never fails to be exciting. A major edge this book has over later tales is that the heroes are far from immortal,

to the point where Gotrek gains his iconic eye patch during a vicious battle.

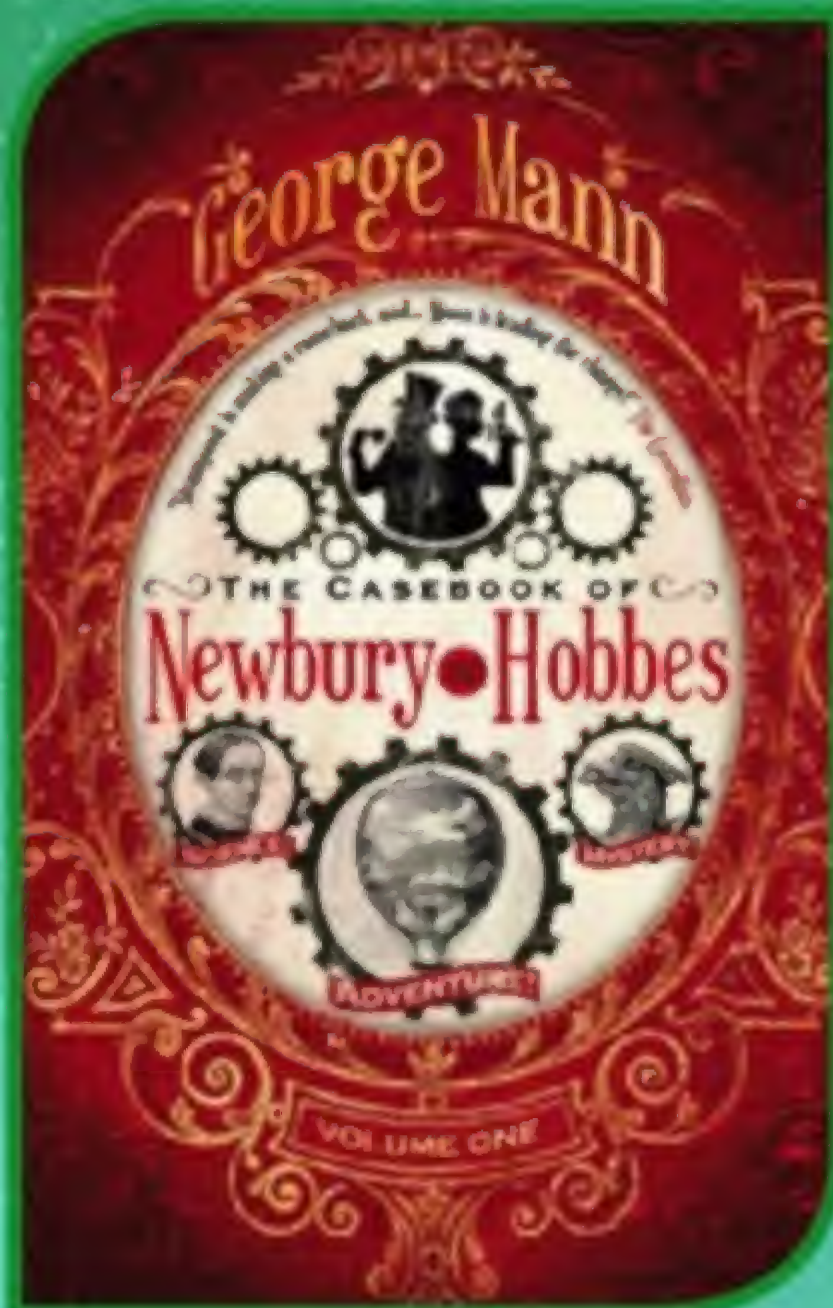
The humour the series is known for is well established here. As with the dark elements, it's perfectly balanced with the combat and provides plenty of moments of levity. The trade-off is a lack of serious drama, but it's hard to imagine anyone turning to *Trollslayer* for deep insights into its characters.

Trollslayer is far from a substantial book, but it proves to be great fun. Better yet, it has aged very well despite being written fifteen years ago. As an introduction to the Old World and a fun adventure story, *Trollslayer* is well worth your time, but there are more serious and substantial tales out there.

Callum Shephard

RATING ★★★★★★★ 7





THE CASEBOOK OF NEWBURY AND HOBBS

Author: George Mann
Publisher: Titan
Release Date: Out Now

This delightful selection of fifteen short stories – some virtually novellas, some just a few pages long – is an ideal stepping point for newcomers to George Mann's deliciously evocative steampunk world of

Victorian detectives, eerie creatures and clanking machines. Sir Maurice Newbury and his 'assistant' Miss Veronica Hobbes are a slightly askew version of Holmes and Watson, operating in the same Victorian England of hansom cabs and choking smogs and of stiff-upper-lipped English gentlemen living in sprawling country mansions, where devious doings are afoot. But Newbury and Hobbes' world is much more arcane and Gothic, populated by mad scientists, tree-demons and lunatic killers; Newbury, a sometime agent for Queen Victoria, even has his own 'Irene Adler' in the shape of the slippery and evasive Lady Arkwell. Oddly enough Miss Hobbes doesn't get much of a look-in here as most of the stories see Newbury teaming up with one of the series' many supporting characters such as crusty Detective Inspector Charles Bainbridge and Newbury's ultimately ill-fated young associate Templeton Black.

The stories are easily accessible in themselves but newbies (like this reviewer) can only benefit from the inclusion of a series 'timeline' and a history of the stories – some of which are new and original to this volume – which helps to make sense of the long and convoluted history of the characters. *The Casebook* chronicles adventures – some of them little more than two-handed conversations between characters – which take place from the end of the nineteenth century to approaching

the middle of the twentieth. The very best are the ones, which tell an actual tale rather than just add colour and background to already established characters. The best of the long-form bunch are probably 'The Lady Killer' in which Newbury is trapped on a crashed Underground carriage with a potential killer on the loose, 'The Dark Path' which recounts a mysterious encounter with a living tree-creature and the hugely atmospheric 'What Lies Beneath', in which a mechanical tentacled machine heaves itself out of the Thames at dead of night. Told from the perspective of Dr. Watson, the story features a cameo appearance by none other than Sherlock Holmes himself and beautifully illustrates the antipathy that Mann suggests exists between two Great Detectives operating in smoky London in the same era.

Mann writes with a real flair both for the Victorian Age with all its trappings and the more scientifically advanced early years of the twentieth century where carriages gave way to motorcars, and there's a real poignancy in some of the later vignettes in which the characters are older and their adventures are recounted as fanciful memories. It's gorgeous stuff that will appeal to Holmes and Watson and steampunk fans alike.

Paul Mount

RATING ★★★★★★★★ **B**



STAR TREK FEDERATION: THE FIRST 150 YEARS

Author: David A. Goodman
Publisher: Titan
Release Date: Out Now

Star Trek is the sort of franchise that seems to welcome immersion; blueprints and manuals for The Federation are readily available for fans to dive into, and *Star Trek Federation: The First 150 Years* is another in the long list of

books that also double as in-world props for the sort of fan who really wants to live in the future. Specifically, this book reads and feels like the sort of textbook one would have to study if you joined Starfleet Academy, and the sort of thing you'd expect to see on the bookshelf of any self-respecting Federation admiral.

The book begins with the Zefram Cochrane's galaxy-altering first flight and goes right on up to the death of James T. Kirk. It's written as if The Federation had hired a historian to create an official account. That also means that anything that has happened in the TV show that the Federation didn't know about is only mentioned in passing. For example, the Xindi (from the series *Enterprise*) are dealt with quite lightly here, despite being a major part of that show. This not only makes sense, it adds weight and credibility to the text. It is littered with artefacts from the world of *Star Trek*, which appear as full-colour plates, usually as a way of bookending subjects and chapters. Everything from personal letters, to translated intercepts from Klingons, to Presidential speeches have been lovingly mocked up and turned into art. The illustrations are similarly good, and the entire work is beautifully presented.

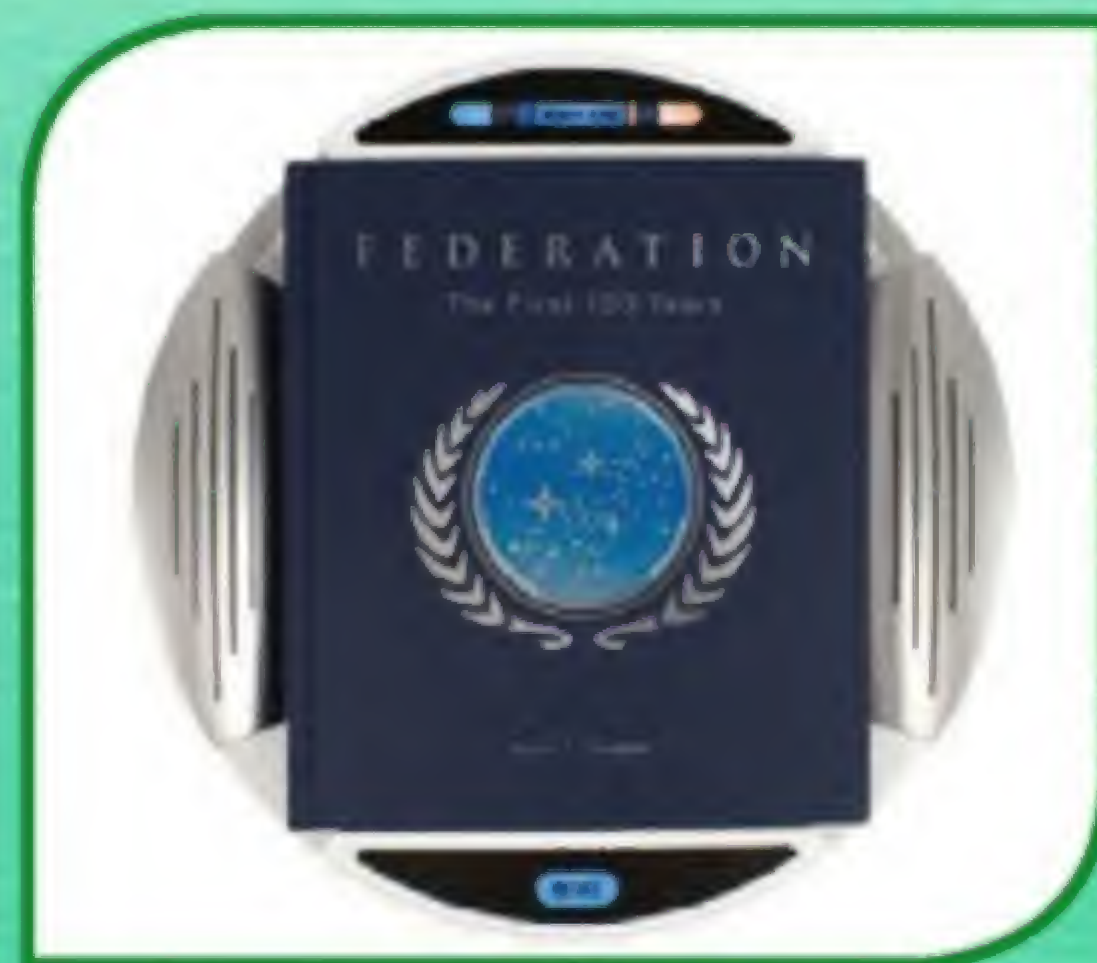
Those not used to reading history books may find this a little dry, but if you're a big fan of *Trek* and looking for a new angle on a subject you know well, then you'll get a real kick out of comparing the 'official' history to

stuff that you know from the show. There's plenty in here for the casual fan as well, and it makes a great text to dive in and out of casually when you're in the mood for a bit of *Star Trek* fun. This is an invaluable text for the die-hard fan, and a great bit of fun for everyone else.

The book is available in two formats; one comes with extra letters, maps and a weird electronic pedestal thingy that lights up and speaks. The other version is just the book on its own. To be honest, the book is good enough on its own without the gimmicks. A must-have for any fan of the show.

Ed Fortune

RATING ★★★★★★★★ **A**





STAR WARS ART: CONCEPT

Author: Lucasfilm

Publisher: Abrams

Release Date: Out Now

Strange as it may seem, 36 years on, the Lucasfilm archives still manage to find new material about the *Star Wars* universe to release.

Star Wars Art: Concept is exactly what the title suggests, and this is its value to *Star Wars* fans. Keeping text to an absolute minimum apart from forewords and introductions by Joe Johnson and Doug Chiang and a short interview by J. W. Rinzler, it lets the artwork do the talking. It's an intriguing and alluring look at what might have been had earlier drafts of the scripts come to life on the screen. Kicking off with the iconic but familiar

Ralph McQuarrie artwork, we see old favourites like the stand-off in the Mos Eisley Cantina and a streamlined Darth Vader fighting Deak Starkiller. Intriguingly, we even see Alderaan not as the ill-fated, peace-loving planet atomised in *A New Hope*, but as a sterile-looking prison planet.

Much as we all owe a huge debt to the late Mr McQuarrie, the book's real reward is the amount of space given to the works of the other concept artists including Industrial Light & Magic personnel who have contributed to the legacy in its various incarnations and expanded

universe but whose work has been largely unseen until now.

Joe Johnston worked at ILM long before he became a director. He was a prolific artist, contributing among several others, early sketches of Yoda (but thankfully they never used the outrageous feet Johnston conceived for him), and a more high-rise Jabba's Palace. In a piece for *Return of the Jedi*, we see there were at one stage giant flying birds ridden by the rebels. How cool would THAT have looked on screen?

Leaving the original trilogy, we have draft sketches for the *Droids* and *Ewoks* cartoon series leading to, among others too numerous to mention, contemporary visionaries Ryan Church and Doug Chiang's beautifully rendered and dynamic artwork for the prequel trilogy. It's incredible to see the first design of General Grievous as a floating armoured entity in dark grey on the one hand, and how little the

Battle of Geonosis changed from concept to realisation on the other.

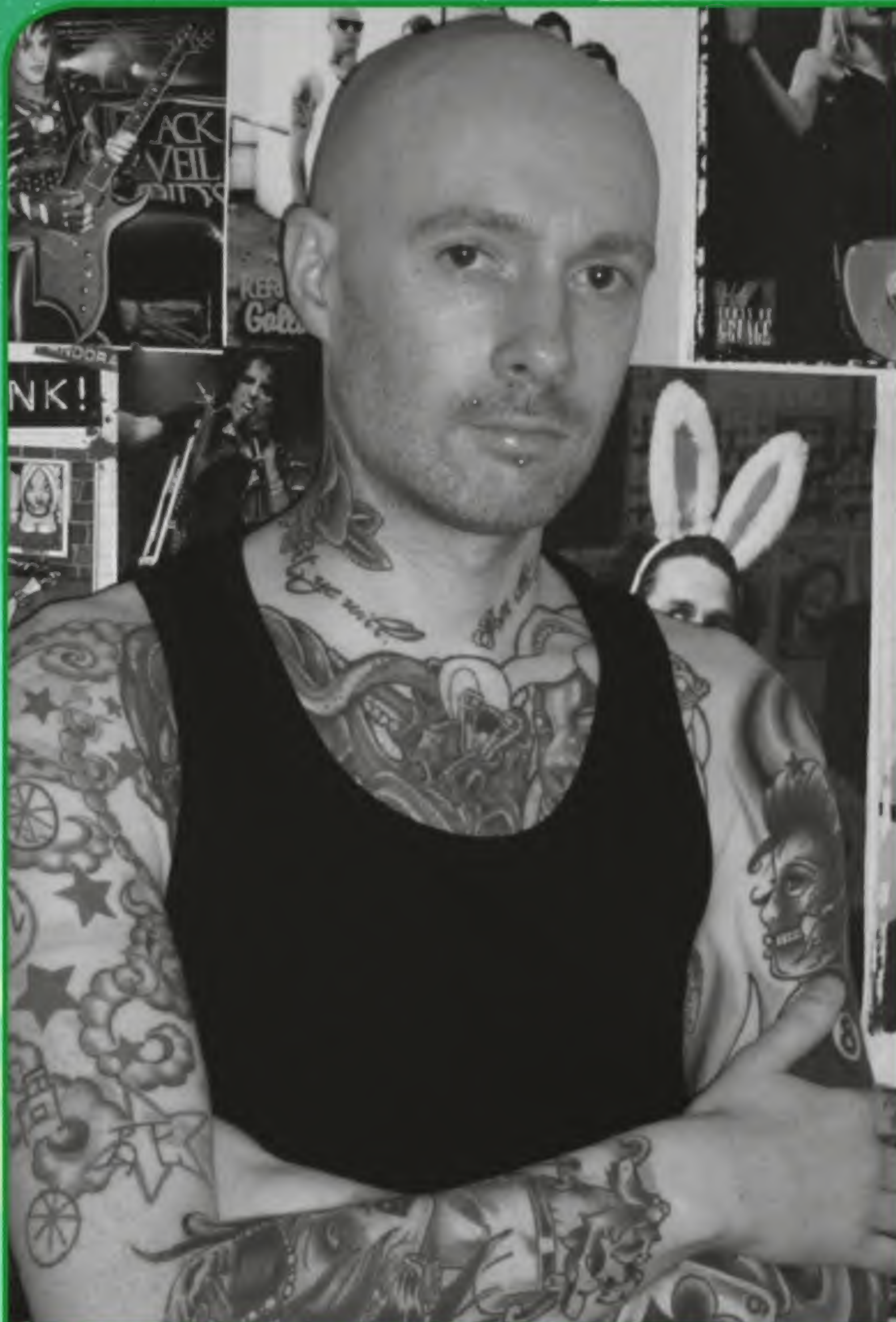
Moving away from the films, the book then shifts its focus to pre-production artwork from the *Clone Wars* series and the comedy show *Star Wars: Detours* which sadly was never released, and completes its journey from 1975 to the present by including of course the the video games.

Concept is in short an epic visual tour encompassing the entire *Star Wars* universe, giving a previously largely unseen glimpse of the soaring imagination of those responsible for bringing to life a stunning vision. It is a beautifully presented book worthy of shelf space in any *Star Wars* fan's collection, if only to stare at the unused ideas and sigh wistfully at the roads not taken.

Robin Pierce

RATING +++++++ 10





INTERVIEW - WAYNE SIMMONS

Belfast born writer Wayne Simmons is among the leading British talents plying his trade in horror literature. His published works have included *Flu*, which told of a fatal strain of influenza reviving its victims post mortem, and its direct sequel, *Fever*. He has further explored a zombie apocalypse in *Drop Dead Gorgeous* and has followed that up with *Doll Parts*. When not writing, blogging, reviewing his beloved metal albums and attending signings, Wayne can usually be found at tattoo conventions. We were recently lucky enough to catch up with him for a chat about his latest work, *Plastic Jesus*, which delves into the realm of cyberpunk...

Starburst: Give us a little bit of background on what your childhood was like.

Wayne Simmons: I was born and raised on a council estate in a Northern Irish town, Portadown, aka 'the Alabama of the North' - and for good reason. I'm a child of the '80s so remember all too well the bad old days of The Troubles: my earliest memories are steeped in hellfire religion, blood and thunder politics, the occasional riot in town and way too many murders reported on TV every day. I guess that all made me the man I am today; listening to incredibly loud music, writing about vampires and zombies and rogue AIs called Jesus.

When did the horror bug first bite?

My first memory of horror is the first episode of the *Hammer House of Horror* TV series and all I remember is blood. I was very young at the time but looking back now, I reckon it was the scene at the kids' party in *The House that Bled to Death*. Later, I started reading Stephen King and that's when the bug really sunk its teeth in. Some of King's earlier novels, *Carrie*, *Firestarter* and *The Shining*, just blew me away. I was hooked on horror from that point.

What was the first horror film you saw?

I've vague memories of that scene around the cot at the end of *Rosemary's Baby*, how surreal and trippy and downright terrifying it was. I also remember watching one of Hammer's *Frankenstein* films, where the monster accidentally kills a child down by the river. I was really touched by that scene and felt a real affection for this misunderstood creature that everyone feared and chased and eventually killed because it was different and ugly and didn't know how to handle itself. For me, that was the first realisation of what fellow hack David Moody often talks of: how that horror isn't really a genre but an emotion. I think with my writing, the emotional turmoil is every bit as vital as the gore and violence: you need the former to give the latter power.

When did you start writing horror? Did you know from the beginning you would write horror or was it an evolution from another direction?

I've always described my writing as an extension of being a fan of the genre: there comes a time when you're into something so much that you just have to contribute in some way, and that was me with horror. It started off with interviews and review features, where I got a chance to talk with the horror writers I was reading; people like David Moody. Through connecting with Dave and his work, I got to thinking of writing something myself. I wrote my first short story, sent it over to Dave, who said some nice things about it, and that story kinda evolved to being my debut novel, *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, first published in 2008.

What inspires you?

I think that's a really tough question as the



real answer is going to be everything. What you create, as an artist - and I use that term in as unwanky a manner as possible - will draw upon pretty much everything that makes you who you are: your likes and dislikes, your childhood, life experience etc. Now, pulling my head back out of my arse, I'd say that the music, films, books, comics etc that I listen to, watch, read, inspire me the most. People watching triggers something, too: maybe not a whole character per se, but definitely character traits. So, yeah, little bits and pieces from just about everything, everywhere inspire me.

Do you have any interesting/amusing tales from your appearances or interaction with fans?

I've got one which, sadly, doesn't involve interaction with fans and that's the signing - and again, I used that term in a very loose sense, as you'll soon see - that David Moody and I did at a certain book store in a certain town around Xmas last year. Long and short, we sat there at our little table by the stairwell nodding politely to all five people who wandered in during our time slot, occasionally trying to convince someone that a zombie book would be the perfect compliment to that Jamie Oliver book tucked under their arm. We left with our heads hung low, not a sale between us. Later that night, we sweated our way through an arts evening where all these lovely middle-class Marys were reading poetry and playing experimental folk music, and we had to get up and read about zombies and aliens. To call it surreal was an understatement, but everyone was very friendly and receptive.

Of your own work, which novel satisfies you the most and why?

Dexter has the Code of Harry and I've got a

code, too: Wayne's code, let's call it. It says that every book I release must be better than the one before it (well, in my view, anyway). So, my current favourite is *Plastic Jesus*. I think it's the best expression so far of what I always seek to achieve as a writer: tight plotting, accessible prose, colourful and flawed characters and an intriguing premise.

Which books and/or films do you consider the most influential?

In general, I'd say that the Romero films inspired my zombie writing the most, simply because the first three - dare I say four? - are an excellent blend of what I think makes the best horror: ordinary people dealing with extraordinary occurrences. Book-wise, I've been particularly inspired by a number through the years, some of which may strike you as odd choices for a genre hack such as myself: *Autumn* by David Moody, *I Am Legend* by Richard Matheson, *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, *High Fidelity* by Nick Hornby - love the humanity and honesty of that book, *The Sins of the Fathers* by Lawrence Block - my favourite noir ever), *The Great Gatsby* by Fitzgerald and *Wuthering Heights* by Bronte - what sad, melancholic tales, *Z For Zachariah* by Robert C. O'Brien and many more.

You're coming out of your comfort zone of horror with your *Plastic Jesus* and striding pretty confidently in to the realm of science fiction. It's a bold move - what prompted it?

Going back to what I said about my writing being an extension of being a fan of the genre, this one is very much a love letter to Ridley Scott for *Blade Runner*, William Gibson for *Neuromancer* and a host of noir and neo-noir writers such as Lawrence Block, Christa Faust, Day Keene, Milton K. Ozaki etc.



What's next?

I'm almost finished on a dirty, grimy vampire book that I'm very excited about. Then there's a noir story, set within a metal club somewhere in the US, that I've parked at second draft. I'm also working on a slasher horror colab with fellow horror hack, Andre Duza, and there's a fantasy I've been tinkering with, too. Plus, anyone want another *Flu* book? Cos I got one more of those in me...

Robin Pierce

PLASTIC JESUS is out now and reviewed on page 85.





View From THE WATCHTOWER

Joel Harley pulls Monitor Duty to bring you the latest news from the mainstream...



Ho-ho-ho, watchers of the Watchtower, and welcome to a fairly festive edition of your humble comics column. The latest news, then! And, boy, do we have some presents under the tree for you. Super spoilers (not here, we should hasten to add), family from another dimension, Red Lanterns, crossovers and a whole host of old faces coming home to roost. Well, Christmas is a time for old friends to pay a visit, after all. So let's open 'er up, eh, and see what Santa has in his sack for you lucky boys and girls...

We start, as we often do, with a visit to the Big Two. For all of my uncharacteristic Christmas cheer, there's a noticeable lack of festivities to this year's Christmas solicitations. *Avengers Annual #1* has Captain America monitoring the Avengers tower on Christmas Eve, but other than that, the occasion is barely marked. Well, our heroes are pretty busy. In the Marvel Universe, Earth's mightiest heroes are still hard at work fending off the might of Thanos. It's a rip-roaring battle, if you're following it, although these Big Events do make managing

a comics column a bit of a pain. There are only so many ways one can say "yep, they're still fighting." Which, incidentally, is what they're doing at the DC Universe too - still attempting to stop *Forever Evil's* Ultraman and his forces in their track. John Constantine is in the thick of it, although all of our heroes are involved, to some extent.

But we return, momentarily, back to Marvel, where it's potentially a not so-jolly time for Daredevil. His current run of comics is to come to an end with issue #36. It's been a great time, but *Daredevil* is to be rebooted

with a brand spanking new issue #1. What state we'll find the Man Without Fear in remains to be seen. Probably fearless, to be fair. Mark Waid is still aboard though, hinting at changes to come, and a 'drastic change in Matt Murdock's career and lifestyle'.

There are certainly drastic changes, and a massive Iron Man spoiler to be found, if you take so much of a glance towards the Internet this month. No spoilers here (although you hardly need 2020 vision to find them) as the conclusion of *Iron Man #17* promises to change the status quo for Tony Stark and his ol' shellhead

persona, potentially forever (or until whenever the powers that be decide to retcon it - whichever happens first). It's not one we can foresee following through to the cinematic universe, although it is a very interesting state of affairs.

Another thing that might stay clear of the cinematic Phases Two, Three or Four, are the changes made to Loki in Al Ewing's *Agent of Asgard*. In an answer to a fan on his blog, Ewing promises that Loki will be boasting a fluid sexuality and even gender, in upcoming issues. This should be no surprise to aficionados and scholars of Norse mythology, but one can only imagine what uptight brother Thor has to say about all of this. Verily.

One aspect where the comics won't be following the movies' lead is in the all new *Ghost Rider*, due to land in March. We can hope for Nicolas Cage and his flamethrower piss (or hope against it, depending on one's tolerance for the Cage) but it's unlikely, with a new *Spirit of Vengeance* promised, set in Los Angeles, facing off against the villainous Mr. Hyde. High-schooler Robbie Reyes is a senior with 'a short fuse and a passion for electronic music and absolutely anything powered by an engine' (writer Felipe Smith there, chatting with Comic Book Resources). Sounds intolerable, but we can't always have the might of Nicolas Cage and his flamethrower urination, can we?

And now, a Christmas miracle. *Miracleman*, that is! Marvel Comics is to republish the classic (and unfinished) eighties run of the long out-of-print *Miracleman*, leading up to the conclusion of the series (only 30 years coming) by original creators Neil Gaiman and Mark Buckingham. *Miracleman #1* is due to make print and digital editions by January. Why, it'll feel like no time at all, after the thirty years since it was last published.



Meanwhile, at DC comics, we see former (and best, for this writer's money) Green Lantern Guy Gardner come to blows with his ex-colleagues in *Red Lanterns* #24. In true Guy Gardner style, he scowls throughout the whole thing. If only the Batman was around to put the sulky Red (ginger) Lantern in his place, the whole thing might have been averted.

But Batman has his own problems, not the least being the return of Clayface in *The Dark Knight* #24. An underappreciated (malleable) face from the rogues gallery, Clayface gets his moment in the spotlight in this Batman-free issue, detailing the man's transformation from troubled actor to gooey monster. It feels like a cast-off from Villains Month, but is worth a (one) shot all the same.

Batman and Superman are set for an alternate universe based crossover in *World's Finest*. As they discover that Huntress and Power Girl are "alternate world" family from Earth 2, the heroes are thrown into the heart of a fantastic battle. Lest we forget that Huntress is an alternate universe daughter to Bruce Wayne, and Powergirl (sadly best known for that boob window in her costume) is Kal-El's cousin, somewhere down the line. Whatever happens, it can't be as crazy as the time Batman and Superman wound up trapped in the bodies of Huntress and Power Girl (yes, that happened) and Batman/Huntress took the time to check out Superman/Power Girl's cleavage. Well, if you will walk around with a giant boob window on your chest...

Ahem. Anyway. Rejoice! For *Sandman Overture* is coming! We've known about it for a while now, but Neil Gaiman has fuelled the fire, posting a picture of himself holding the shiny new comics in his hands. We can barely wait. DC hasn't treated its old Vertigo heroes too well since integrating them into the 52 proper (although Snyder's *Swamp Thing* was pretty good) but with Gaiman behind the reins, we should be safe from seeing Dream joining the Justice League (Dark) or trading blows with Batman anytime soon. One hopes, anyway.

Dream of the Endless and Miracleman aren't the only beloved characters returning to eager audiences – Asterix and Obelix are back! The first Asterix comic in eight years has recently been released to 15 countries, taking the diminutive Gaul and his massive friend to Scotland for the first time. *Asterix and the Picts* is the first in the series to not have the involvement of creators of Goscinny and Uderzo, but promises the same historical hijinks, time-based tomfoolery and period punning of the characters' earlier adventures. "There are characters in kilts," writer Jean-Yves Ferri told *The Telegraph*, "and whisky." We can breathe a sigh of relief, cheered by the fact that *Asterix's* curious brand of ancient cultural stereotypes remains as intact as ever.

It really is the time for people returning, and coming back from places. Cashing in on the Cumberbatch love we've all been feeling recently (apart from maybe that Assange thing, which no-one bothered to see) his Khan makes a comic book debut in IDW's *Star Trek*. A five-issue miniseries, *Star Trek: Khan* will detail both the aftermath of *Into Darkness* and also Khan's very origins (not



the one we saw in *Space Seed*, I'll wager), from childhood through to the Eugenics Wars. Altogether now: Khaaaaaaaaaaaaan!

Meanwhile, over at Avatar Press, Garth Ennis can be found penning a story about dogs surviving on a post-apocalyptic landscape. *Rover Red Charlie* is due imminently. Expect your typical brand of Garth Ennis ultraviolence, smut and lashings of heart, although if it's anything like Grant Morrison's *We3*, I expect to be in tears by the end of it all.

We finish, still in indie (ish) territory, with some intriguing news fresh from IDW Comics. Remember that time Homer Simpson met Mulder and Scully? Well, the FBI's finest are to return in a series of equally odd crossovers with *The X-Files: Conspiracy*. Kicking off with *Conspiracy – Ghostbusters*, you can expect to see Mulder and Scully investigating the characters of the *Ghostbusters*, *Crow*, *Transformers* and – perhaps most intriguingly – the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* franchises very soon. Who ya gonna call? This must be a case for Mulder and Scully.

And with that, frankly, bizarre news, we wrap up (like a present, get it) our look at the month's comic book happenings. Whatever might be in your comic book haul this Christmas, be sure to keep me informed! ✦

Joel Harley can be contacted at: joel.harley@starburstmagazine.com and tweeted @joelharley



ADVENTURES ON ALTERNATIVE EARTHS

the World of Indie Comics & Beyond...
with P.M. Buchan



Welcome to Adventures On Alternative Earths, the wolf in sheep's clothing that lures you in with promises of sophistication and literary excellence and then suckerpunches you with a stack of the UK's finest graphic novels...

Whether you've never read a comic before and think that they're a juvenile medium for idiots or you have a standing order at your local comic store, the UK is going through a creative renaissance in sequential art and I guarantee that there are more quality comics being published today than at any point in history. This month we're exploring Early Earth in a kayak, meandering through the Somme, tackling eating disorders in a heartfelt memoir and reclaiming the past in a slew of graphic novels from Jonathan Cape.

The Encyclopedia of Early Earth, by Isabel Greenberg, is a story about stories, like *One Thousand and One Nights*, or Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, and like those tales Greenberg's graphic novel is timelessly brilliant. Rendered in a simple but charming painted style that looks very much like the aesthetic that Nobrow press favours, the

art throughout is endearing, consistent and beautiful, put to work in service of a story about a Nord Man and a South Pole woman who fall deeply in love despite a magnetic field that keeps them apart always. The Nord Man is a champion storyteller, and entertains his wife with tales of the journey that led him to meet her, in a land of magic and wonder where gods make playthings of mortals and adventurous old ladies outsmart giants. Greenberg references famous stories and myths, weaving them together into a rich tapestry that is very much her own creation, a stunningly accomplished graphic novel and work of art that it would take a heart of stone not to enjoy. There's a great warmth to *The Encyclopedia of Early Earth*, a childlike glee on every page, not least in the different interpretations of the great creators, Birdman, Kid and Kiddo. However familiar the source

material might feel to the reader, there's both wonderful internal consistency and whimsy to the way the different stories interact. This is a book that would make an excellent entry into graphic novels as a storytelling medium, the kind of lovingly printed hardback that even literary snobs would be proud to own. Isabel Greenberg is clearly destined to make a big contribution to British comics.

Another coffee table book from Jonathan Cape recently was Joe Sacco's *The Great War*, an illustrated diorama of the first day of the battle of the Somme. It comes in a hardcover slipcase and opens out into a 24-foot-long black-and-white drawing of the Great War, July 1st, 1916. I was torn about how to respond to this one. On one hand it's an incredible achievement: a hugely detailed work of art, manufactured in a format that everybody can own, depicting the realities of war and the futility

of this great push for land. The scale tells the story in a way that no single comic page ever could and Sacco's experience makes him one of the best qualified people in the world to depict the Somme in this way. The other side of the argument is that this is an overpriced adult version of *Where's Wally?*, where narrative plays second fiddle to artistic ambition, and where the graphic novel format is reduced to something that can be scanned and discarded in minutes. I'd never make that argument if I was discussing buying a painting, but Joe Sacco is best known for his sequential art, and this isn't sequential art, it's just art, a very nice print of war. That package does come with annotations by the author and a 16-page booklet about the battle by Adam Hochschild, which was a very welcome explanation, and adds value to the slipcase. Ultimately, this isn't a book that will likely reach a big audience. As a piece of standalone art and an extension of Sacco's abilities it's a success, as part of the line of Cape Graphic Novels slightly less so.

Much more interesting is Katie Green's *Lighter Than My Shadow*, a graphic memoir

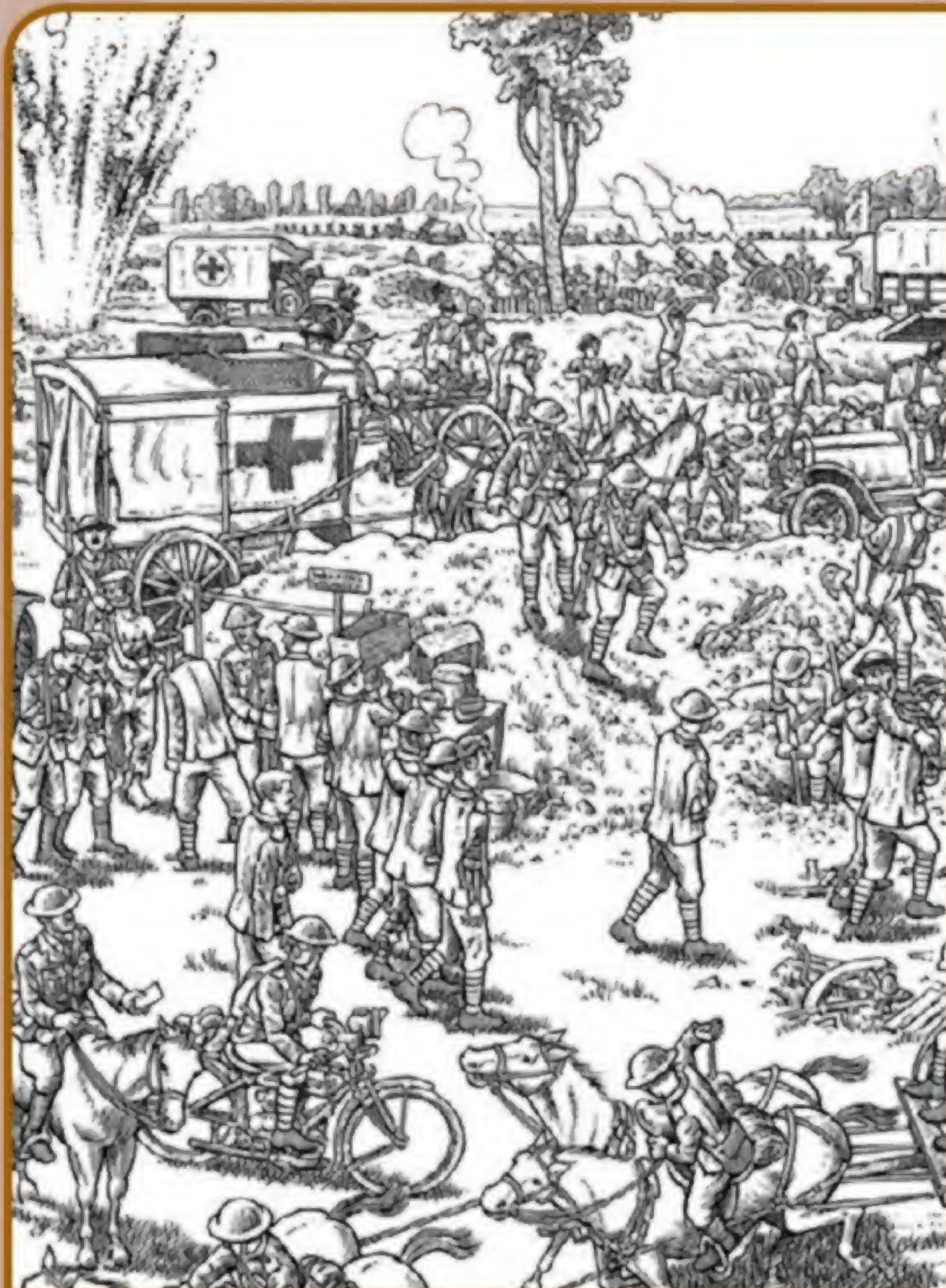


The Encyclopedia of Early Earth by Isabel Greenberg

of eating disorders, abuse and recovery. This is very easily one of the best non-fiction graphic novels that I've ever read, brutally honest, incredibly insightful and ultimately uplifting. Beginning with Green's early life as a fussy eater and cause of concern for her parents, *Lighter Than My Shadow* traces the coping mechanisms that Green developed to keep everybody off her back, laying the foundations for more sinister problems in adolescence. It's a massive book, and the high page count really gives the creator scope to explore her past in great detail, allowing the reader to intimately experience the development of her problems. Part of its effectiveness is how everyday and ordinary the narrative becomes, in a way that I recognise chivvy my own children to eat at home, leading to a string of people that offer their own solutions to Green's eating disorders. As she becomes more vulnerable in the course of the story, Katie Green is preyed upon in a number of ways, and her honesty in depicting the ways that she was manipulated is inspirational and at times heart-breaking. As well as being a great story and an enthralling read, *Lighter Than My Shadow* is the kind

of book that you want to thrust at anybody that can empathise with Katie Green, the kind of book that you want to leave lying around, to say "I might not understand what you're going through, but you're not alone." The linework is delicate and expressive, with some fantastic visual representations of hunger, depression and obsession. Certain pages recalling childhood fears also contain great inventiveness, hinting at the kind of fiction that might lie in the author's future. I'm always fascinated to see what kind of a career a cartoonist embarks on when their first published work tackles autobiographical themes, and wherever Katie Green goes next she clearly has a worldview that will shed new light on many aspects of modern life.

Speaking of quality comics and graphic novels, I'll be exhibiting at Thought Bubble comic convention in Leeds on Saturday 23rd and Sunday 24th November, where I'm launching the second issue of my manga-inspired gothic-horror series *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, and satirical horror-comedy anthology *BLACKOUT II: YOLO*, which is jam-packed with remorseful werewolves, accidental murders, booze and



The Great War by Joe Sacco



Lighter Than My Shadow by Katie Green

bestiality. *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, which is illustrated by Karen Yumi Lusted and based on the poem of the same name by John Keats, was featured by the *Times Literary Supplement*, and reviewer Brett Schwaner called it "a wicked little indie comic featuring some truly deranged, damned, and sadistic characters." The first issue of *BLACKOUT*, which featured booze, death-by-misadventure, necrophilia, cannibalism and suicide, was called "beautiful and obscene and glorious and depraved" by Jamie Smart and "slapstick horror at its best" by *Forbidden Planet International's* Richard Bruton. Almost all of the artists have illustrated *StARBURST* strips in the past, comprising some of the best and most offensive current British comic creators.

This month's *StARBURST* strip, *Noah's Folly*, was illustrated by James Lawrence, creator of *Dangerine* and co-creator of post-apocalyptic anthology

The Waste. Check him out at braindropz.tumblr.com and tell him *StARBURST* sent you. That's all we have room for this week, but be sure to check out some new comics, whether you make it to Thought Bubble or sit at home reading free webcomics. Mike Garley's British zombie comic anthology *Dead Roots* will be available in paperback and hardback early in the new year, Owen Johnson and Indio!s *Raygun Roads* is now disturbing impressionable minds all over the country and the latest issue of period adventure comic *Curia Regis*, by Robin Hoelzemann, is teaching period drama lovers of all ages that comics can be fun too. Get out there and support local comic creators!

If you have a comic you'd like reviewed, PM Buchan can be contacted at:
phillip.buchan@starburstmagazine.com
 Tweeted @PMBuchan
 and his work can be viewed at:
pmbuchan.com
pmbuchan.bigcartel.com



JLA VOLUME 1: WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS

Writer: Geoff Johns

Artist: David Finch

Publisher: DC

Release Date: November 16th

In the past, the *Justice League of America* has been a superhero team book that usually contained some of DC's A-List superheroes: Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman and The Flash. Since the DC52 reboot however, this team of headliners has simply been called the Justice League, with the JLA being a team of secondstringers sponsored by the American government. (Specifically, an organisation called A.R.G.U.S. Presumably S.H.I.E.L.D. was already taken).

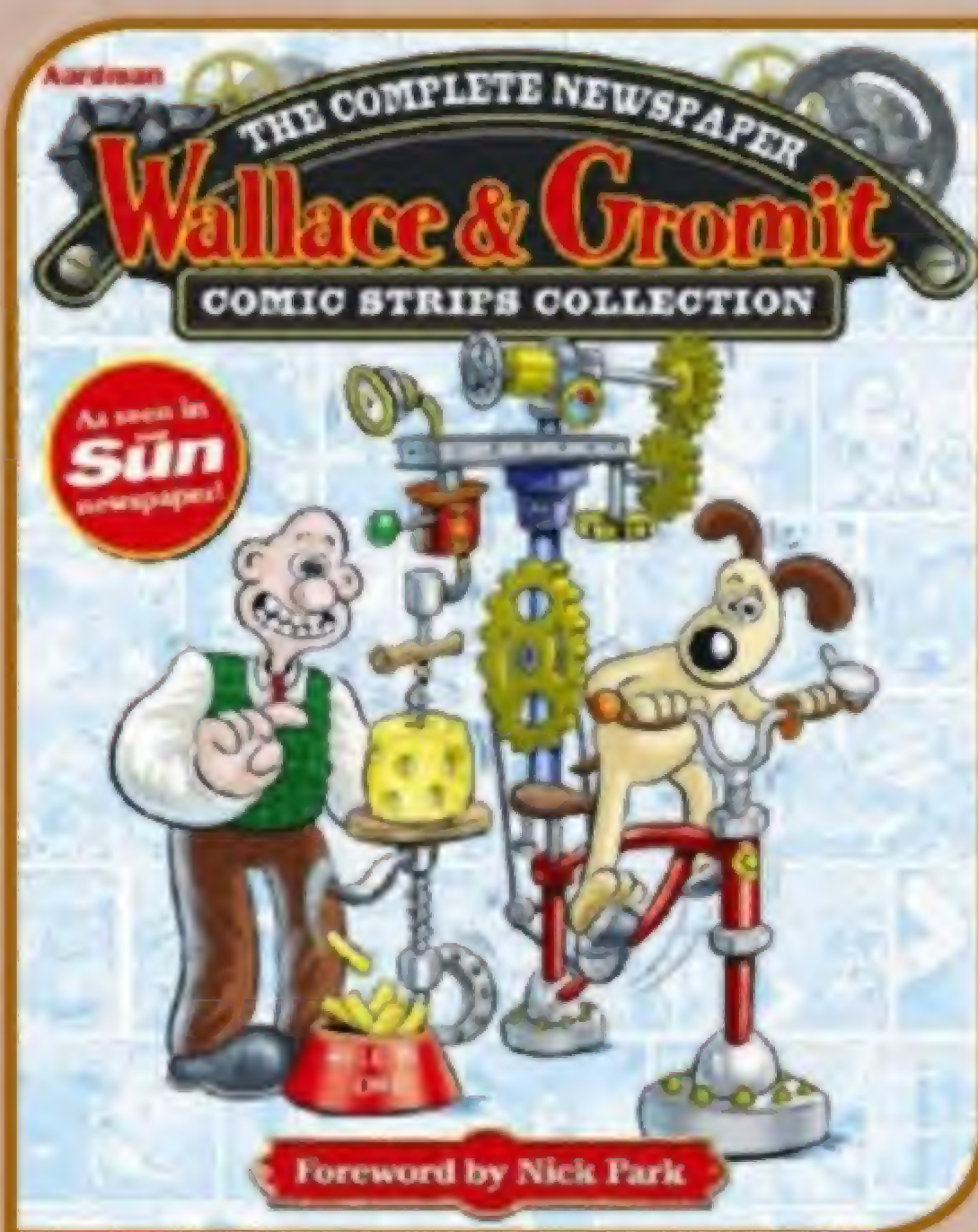
Justice League of America: World's Most Dangerous is the origin story of this team of also-rans, with Martian Manhunter, Green Arrow and Catwoman thrown in to give the reader at least a handful of recognisable characters. The premise is problematic from the start; the early scenes involve a discussion as to who will be on the team, and they are directly compared to the more interesting heroes who happen to be in a different book. Though this is meant to make the reader compare Catwoman to Batman or Vibe to The Flash, what it actually does is make us wish we were reading another book. The focus is mostly on the characters we recognise, which is a bit of a shame; in a book that seems designed to bring the less well-known heroes further forward, it seems that no effort is made to make them interesting.

The story is also hampered by the needs of the comic book industry. The first half plods along nicely, the team starts getting together, they discover a secret society of villains that need hunting down and the internal conflict starts building up. Then suddenly we're plunged into a huge showdown fight with the Justice League with no explanation or build up. This is because the actual backstory has happened in another book. Another B-team, this time the poorly titled *Justice League Dark*, also turn up to confuse matters further.

In effect, this means the reader is left with half a book. It is to the credit of writer Geoff Johns that the second half is at least coherent and consistent, but the fact that half the story is in another book utterly breaks the slight amount of narrative tension the earlier chapters managed to produce. *Justice League of America: World's Most Dangerous* feels very much like a footnote in the history of JLA-themed books; it lacks the attention-grabbing power of Grant Morrison's run or the character-driven slapstick fun of the Giffen/DeMatteis era, instead being a by-the-numbers exercise that shortchanges the characters and the reader.

Ed Fortune

RATING ★★★★★ S



THE COMPLETE NEWSPAPER WALLACE + GROMIT COMIC STRIPS COLLECTION

Writer: Various

Artist: Various

Publisher: Titan

Release Date: Out Now

The tabloid publication that is *The Sun* tends to divide people; there are those who buy it, knowing that they're responsible for making it the United Kingdom's most read source of gossip and sporting information, and there are those who don't understand the appeal and wonder why the notoriously biased and hyperbole-filled rag is so popular.

If you're in the latter category, then you are probably unaware that it's also the home of the *Wallace and Gromit* comic strip. Based on the popular animated characters created by Nick Park and the Aardman studio, *The Complete Newspaper Wallace & Gromit Comic Strips Collection* is a handy solution for those looking to catch up on the adventures of the hilarious inventor and his genius dog. (It's also published by Titan Books, who are not connected to *The Sun*.) Aardman's intention in turning their loveable and family-friendly buffoons into the stars of a daily three panel comic strip was to follow in the footsteps of classic newspaper cartoons such as *Peanuts* and *Andy Capp*. There are three strips on each page, and two pages make up a week's worth of strip. (Clearly Wallace and Gromit take the Sunday off.) Each week has a loose theme; one week might be about ice-skating, then another week it could be baking. They're two-dimensional drawn comic strips,

rather than photo stills, though there are some photos of the 'live-action' versions of the characters as well, which break up the various sections nicely.

In all cases, the essential silliness of the characters is maintained. Wallace is clever but clueless; Gromit is wise, practical and doomed to end up the punchline of something unfortunate. The elements that made these two so popular; wacky hijinks, mad inventions and terrible, terrible puns stay consistent throughout, as does the art. The jokes are a little samey, and the art is never going to win any prizes (though it'll probably appear in an exhibition or two at some point). It hardly matters; Wallace and Gromit are as funny on the page as they are on the screen, and if you love them, you'll love this.

Ed Fortune

RATING ★★★★★★ B





MONSTER MASSACRE

Writer: Various
Artist: Various
Publisher: Titan
Release Date: Out Now



With its large format and thick glossy covers, *Monster Massacre* feels like a British comic book annual, albeit one for grown-ups, and that's exactly what it is: an anthology crammed with multiple stories from different artists and writers, as well as some text-only short stories. The only thing missing is a puzzle page and a pull-out pin-up.

Monster Massacre is very much aimed at adults; not only is every story some flavour or other of horror, the pages that aren't filled with monsters are filled with drawings of women in various states of undress. The artwork throughout is very, very nice, and features work from the likes of D'Israeli, Alex Horley and Tom Raney. The collection begins with an old-school Jack Kirby reprint, and gets better from that point on.

The stories are short and scary, and the full range of spooky is explored here: from clever little fairy tales, to daft superhero stories with semi-naked succubi, the book does its best to wow the reader. Though there are no poor stories in the set, the collection is very

wide and it veers from haunting darkness to gory silliness in a single turn of the page. This makes for a slightly bumpy read, but this isn't the sort of thing you read in one sitting anyway (though you could do so quite easily); it's more something to dive into when you have a spare moment. *Monster Massacre* is an excellent showcase and will appeal to those of us who wish that the horror comics far outnumbered the spandex crowd.

Ed Fortune

RATING ★★★★★★ B



SHARKY

Writer: Dave Elliott
Artist: Alex Horley
Publisher: Titan
Release Date: Out Now

Sharky is a bit of an oddity, comic book-wise. It started out as a failed pitch to Marvel and DC, and after getting firmly refused by both, seems to have been reworked into a parody and homage of those comic book giants. This explains why, though the book isn't very good, it's very difficult not to love it.

Much like the highly successful *Toxic Avenger* movies, *Sharky* is so silly and overblown that it's simply impossible to take it seriously. The plot revolves around a young boy who wishes he was a superhero. Thanks to a convoluted and incredibly dumb series of coincidences, it turns out that the boy is the offspring of gods, and can (at will) turn into a slick, muscle-bound hero called Sharky. He then teams up with a female version of the thunder god Thor (who is barely dressed), a part-Wolverine, part-Batman, all-cliché character called Ravenclaw, and similarly daft versions of Iron Man and Captain America.

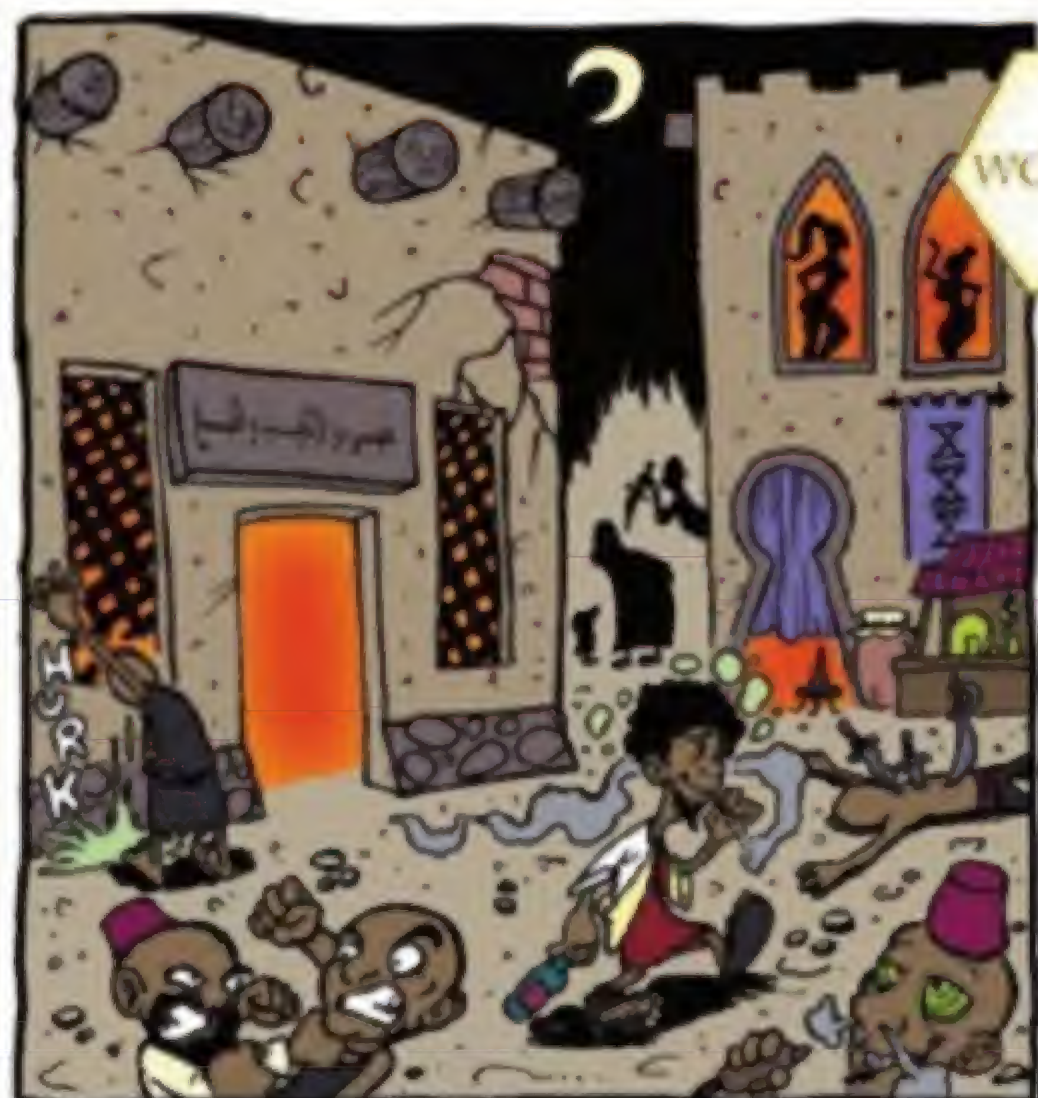
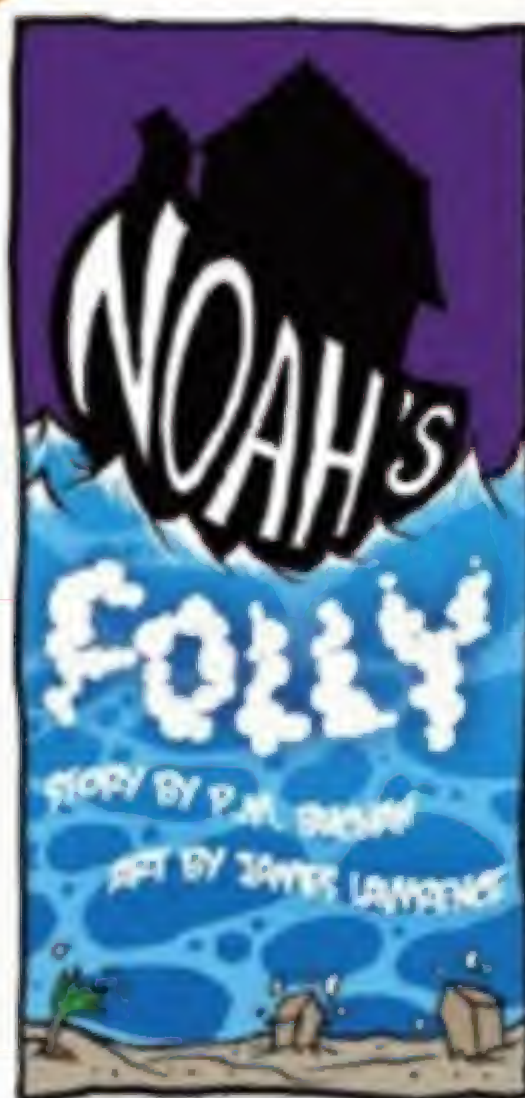
The overblown, Bisleysque artwork simply adds to the cheesiness, with the men looking like carrots made of muscle and the women resembling beach ball jugglers. There isn't a hint of realism here, and despite the odd zombie or two, there's very little of the grimness or darkness that plagues this genre. Being an independent book, cameos and crossovers come from all sorts of odd places, and we get brief appearances of Milk and Cheese, Vampirella and The Mask, which is nice but adds nothing to the book.

The plot is not very coherent, and the characters don't make much sense at all. It is fun, and pretty in a hyper-stylised sort of way. If you're willing to detach your brain for a short while and indulge in a bit of dumb spoofery, you'll love it. But if you're the sort of person who demands depth and storytelling from your funny books, then this is not for you.

Ed Fortune

RATING ★★★★★ S





MAN HAS TURNED THE WORLD INTO A HIVE OF SCUM AND VILLAINY...

NOAH, I NEED YOUR HELP TO WASH AWAY THIS EVIL!



HOW MUCH OF OUR RENT DID YOU DRINK THIS TIME, YOU ADDLED WRETCH?

NEVER MIND THAT, GOD ASKED ME TO GATHER UP THE ANIMALS AND BUILD AN ARK FOR MANKIND'S REDEMPTION!



THE ANIMALS I UNDERSTAND, BUT 50 CASKS OF ALE? SURELY GOD TEACHES TEMPERANCE?

LOOK AT THEM BEAUTIES GO! TWO OF EACH.



YOU DON'T GET TO TELL ME WHAT GOD'S PLAN IS, I'LL TELL YOU WHAT GOD'S PLAN IS!!

STAY HERE TO WITNESS IT FIRST HAND, AND NAG ME NO MORE!!



ONE MONTH LATER...

WHAT HAVE I DONE? 11 MORE MONTHS TO KILL AND NOT A SOUL TO TALK TO.



SIX MONTHS LATER...

WHOOAAAAA WE'RE HALFWAY THERE. WHOA-HOAH, LIIIVIN' ON A PRA-YER!



ONE YEAR LATER...

THE FLOOD IS OVER, YOUR ANIMAL FRIENDS CAN GO FORTH AND REPOPULATE THE WORLD.

NOW I'LL CREATE WOMAN AGAIN, TO REWARD YOUR FAITHFULNESS.

ABOUT THAT... YOU CAN COME OUT NOW, NOAH JUNIOR.



A YEAR'S AN AWFUL LONG TIME, BOSS...

I'VE GOT NEEDS TOO, Y'KNOW...



I GIVE UP!!

END

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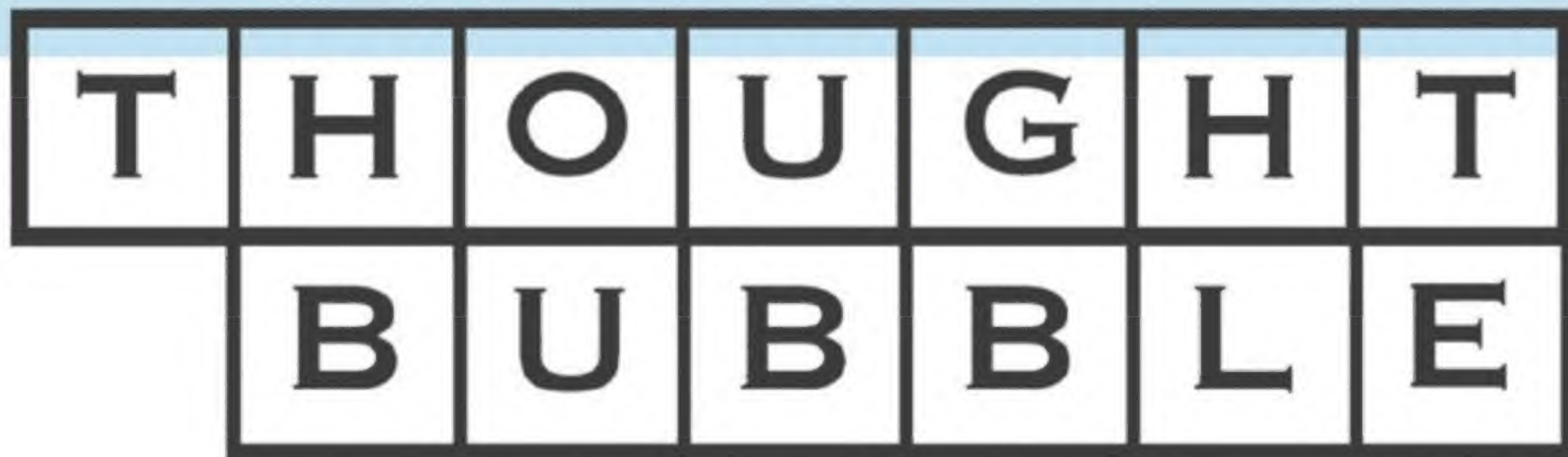
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News and
Previews
in Gaming by
Lee Price



The Good – Ken Levine Receives Lifetime Achievement Award

The Golden Joysticks are about as legitimate a body for recognising quality in the gaming industry as any other so it is great that the awards have started to recognise long-term achievement within the industry, with the first recipient of their Lifetime Achievement award being Ken Levine.

The man behind *BioShock* will be recognised for his contributions to the industry, with a press release reading “Best known for the critically acclaimed *BioShock* series, his exploration of player choice and consequence, as well as his dizzying imaginative design work and storytelling, [Levine] continues to be a huge influence on game makers around the world. As this year’s *BioShock Infinite* proved, Levine is one of the most interesting creators working in games — and it’s fitting that he should be the inaugural winner of our Lifetime Achievement award.”

While you could make an argument that there are a few figures in the industry that perhaps deserve to be recognised ahead of Levine, it is also good to see the man get some well-earned acclaim for being the

mind behind two of the best games of this generation. It remains to be seen if the Golden Joysticks will continue the new award into future years, essentially creating a gaming hall of fame in the process.

The Bad – Founder Justin Waldron Departs Zynga

It just goes from bad to worse for Zynga. The company has seen a bit of an exodus of development talent during 2013, not to mention the rather scary financial losses the company is making at the moment, and now another one of the original team is walking away.

Justin Waldron announced his resignation via a Facebook post, stating: “I’ve decided it’s time to leave Zynga and venture off on my own again. It’s been 6 and a half years since we pushed the button to launch our first game, and each moment since has been magic. It’s incredibly humbling to have worked with such a talented team. I am grateful to have had the chance to help build a company that touched so many people. Thank you to everyone who has been a part of it - both in the trenches and for playing the games.”

The company continues to flounder thanks to the casual gaming market’s

microscopic attention span. The glory days are long gone for Zynga and I reckon it’s only a matter of time before we are talking about them in the past tense.

The Ugly – 2K Marin Hit with Layoffs

It seems that no studio is safe from the current economic woes and, yet again, we have news of another developer having to release a number of hard working staff as a result of budget cuts. This time it is the turn of 2K Marin, developers of *BioShock 2* and *The Bureau*, to be hit with massive layoffs, with some going so far as to claim the studio has been closed.

A representative of 2K commented: “We can confirm staff reductions at 2K Marin. While these were difficult decisions, we regularly evaluate our development efforts and have decided to reallocate creative resources. Our goal to create world-class video game titles remains unchanged.”

It is believed that some of the staff should find a home in a new studio being opened by 2K, but many will now be out of a job for the foreseeable future. It’s a shame too, as *BioShock 2* was actually a very good game that simply couldn’t top its predecessor. However *The Bureau* never really amounted to much following a troubled development period and may have helped the bigwigs at 2K make their decision to axe the studio.

The Odd – *Beyond: Two Souls* Creates Nude Digital Ellen Page Dilemma

Oh Quantic Dream, you scoundrels. It appears that the shower scene in the rather disappointing *Beyond: Two Souls* has revealed more of star actress Ellen Page than anybody intended.

As it turns out, Quantic Dreams fully skinned the nude model of Page, providing her with all of her lady bits before obscuring the character model with the shower. The game then gets into the hands of people with a bit of time on their hands, they investigate and digital nude images of Ellen Page get plastered all over the internet.

This is mostly funny because of Sony’s reaction, as the company has been throwing their legal weight around against anybody found hosting the images. Page has not

commented on the issue yet but, considering the character model is digital and not actually her it shouldn't really be an issue. Well not unless she decided to do the motion capture for the scene in the buff and the digital images are an accurate representation.

David Cage has a bit of a reputation for trying to introduce sex into his games in a tasteful manner. He failed with *Fahrenheit*, where two of the main characters end up bumping uglies despite one of them being sort of dead. Now he has created a complete digitised image of a nude Ellen Page that was not even required for the game it was used in. Smart move Mr Cage. Did nobody learn anything from the Hot Coffee scandal?

The Rest - Wii Discontinued in Japan

It had to happen eventually. The advent of the new generation of consoles will see all of the current gen eventually cease production and the Wii appears to be the first to start falling by the wayside. Nintendo have announced that they will be ceasing production of the system in their native land, hopefully cutting some costs that will help slightly recoup the losses they have been making on the Wii U.

The console will continue production in the US for the time being, ensuring that cash-strapped gamers and casuals can pick up a bargain console for Christmas. Look for all three of the current generation to start dropping off production as we get further into 2014.

Fox Files Trademark for *Alien: Isolation*

It looks like fans who were disappointed over the cancellation of the *Alien* RPG game will have something to look forward to as Fox have trademarked *Alien: Isolation* for use as the title of an upcoming game. No real details are available just yet but it is good to see that the *Alien* franchise will soldier on despite the *Colonial Marines* debacle.



New Red Dead?

Rockstar are famously reticent when it comes to unveiling details of their upcoming titles, preferring to drip-feed information as and when it suits them. However, savvy gamers have deduced that the company is likely working on a follow-up to the brilliant *Red Dead Redemption* after catching a glimpse of the CV of senior graphics engineer Doron Feinstein.

The CV claims that she is currently "*working on the next version of a famous IP*", which is vague to say the least. However a number of people are speculating that this must refer to *Red Dead* as it is pretty much the only big Rockstar IP to not have an already announced title currently being worked on.

While this is certainly possible it appears that some are forgetting older Rockstar games, such as *Bully*, that could well be receiving an update. We will just have to wait and see what Rockstar come up with.

Games with Gold Made Permanent

Microsoft have actually made the news for something positive this month, as the company has announced that their 'Games with Gold' offer will be made a permanent feature of the XBL Gold package.

The offer sees those who have signed up to the Gold service being offered two free games for download every month, with

titles such as *Halo 3* and *Assassin's Creed 2* already being put up for grabs over the last few months. This is a great bonus for those who have been pouring money into the company's coffers over the last few years and may also see some standard subscription holders make the move and upgrade. Good move all round.

More Nintendo HD Remakes May Be Coming

Following the success of their HD re-release of the *Wind Waker*, Nintendo have stated that they would be willing to look into more HD remakes if they can get external development partners involved. This would leave them free to continue making new games whilst also being able to milk the cash cow that is their own games library a little further.

The company state that they would be happy to pass on projects that simply require manpower, rather than creative expertise, to other developers to get them out in good time.

Shigeru Miyamoto himself commented on the possibility at a recent roundtable. He pushed the idea of developers adding features that take advantage of the Wii U, stating: "*The main thing that's always going to be on our minds is what new elements of gameplay can we use with the Gamepad as applied to some of these older games. We want to find some way to bring a refreshing experience to this rather than simply update the visuals and leave it at that.*"

SOUTH PARK: THE STICK OF TRUTH (PS3, 360, PC) - DEC 13TH



December is truly awful for game releases. Still, there are a few games that manage to see the light of day and *Stick of Truth* is one of them. The *South Park* series has never really made for good gaming and this will likely be another fairly standard adventure, with the usual gang riffing on traditional RPG fare. Expect the parody to be alright and the game to be playable but nothing spectacular.

ADVENTURE TIME: EXPLORE THE DUNGEON BECAUSE I DON'T KNOW (PC, PS3, 360, WIIU, 3DS) - DEC 15TH

We are really struggling for some good games to put in this section this month. *Adventure Time* is a licensed game from the Cartoon Network series of the same name. It is styled as an isometric hack n' slash game in the same vein as *Diablo* and will feature voice acting from the series. In all fairness, the first game in the small franchise achieved some middling to decent reviews, so this may be worth a play if you're a fan.



DEVIL'S THIRD (360, PS3, PC) DEC 31ST

Valhalla Game Studios, which is made up of developers who left Team Ninja back in 2008, hasn't done a lot since their exodus. The company will be hoping to make a name for themselves with *Devil's Third*, which is a first person shooter that bases its plot on the Kessler syndrome theory, whereby space debris makes space travel and exploration increasingly difficult. Sounds interesting but a troubled development period leaves potential for a ropey game.



BIOSHOCK INFINITE: BURIAL AT SEA: EPISODE ONE (360, PS3, PC, VITA) - DEC 31ST



BioShock Infinite is one of the crowning achievements of the outgoing generation of games, so episodic content is a given and should be lapped up by fans. *Burial at Sea* will take the player back to Rapture and will deal with the events that lead to the eventual destruction of the underground city, explaining the circumstances behind the war that broke out in the city.

BROKEN SWORD: THE SERPENT'S CURSE Q4 2013



The *Broken Sword* games were some of the best point and click titles to emerge in the wake of LucasArts revolutionising the genre. Unfortunately the third in the series ruined things a little, with the fourth seemingly sounding the death knell. However, thanks to the joys of Kickstarter, we will be seeing a fifth game that will apparently take the series back to its roots. George and Nico return in a 2D adventure that should hopefully echo the older games in the series.

FABLE ANNIVERSARY (360) FEB 1ST

I remember when the original *Fable* was released. Peter Molyneux had hyped it up to the point where it could never be what he claimed it would be, but it was still a damned fine game. The HD anniversary version of the title will remind gamers of the fact and the benefit of hindsight should hopefully see the game be given credit for the title it was rather than the title it wasn't.





BATMAN: ARKHAM ORIGINS

Developer: Warner Bros. Games Montreal / **Publisher:** Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment / **Platform:** PS3, Xbox 360, PC, Wii U / **Release Date:** Out Now

In 2009, developers Rocksteady revolutionised the superhero gaming genre with *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, a taut, reverent love letter to the Dark Knight and his world. That game's sequel, *Arkham City* opened up the floor to an open-world Gotham City and an even larger roster of heroes and villains. With Rocksteady handing over the reins to Warner Brothers for this prequel, could *Arkham Origins* keep up the high standards set by its predecessors, or has the magic left, along with stars Kevin Conroy and Mark Hamill?

The Batman of *Arkham Origins* is a younger, more brusque detective than we've seen in previous iterations (although videogame Batman has always seemed like an angrier, nastier bastard), his perma-furious chin covered in stubble, his Batsuit a massive set of armour plates. Looking at the back of his head is like watching Christian Bale's bull neck in *Batman Begins*. The game may be set at Christmas time, but there's no festive cheer to be had for everyone's favourite grumpy vigilante. To be fair, he does have a lot on his plate here.

Sinister crime boss Black Mask has heaped a massive bounty upon the Bat's head, and a whole host of assassins have come to claim the prize – among others, Deathstroke, Deadshot and Bane. Then there's the likes of the Penguin, Mad Hatter and the Riddler to deal with, before we even get *started* on the fact that there's a brand new villain on the loose. Anyone special? Oh, just some chap calling himself 'the Joker'. So much for a quiet Christmas with Alfred and the bats.

At first glance, not much seems to have changed since *Arkham City*. In fact, it all feels very familiar. Opening with a riot in Blackgate Prison (looking suspiciously similar to Arkham here) before heading out

to a pre-asylum Gotham City (which, it must be said, doesn't look all that different either) it would appear that the new management are planning on playing things very much within their comfort zone. Remember that feeling you got as you walked the Joker into Arkham? Or as Bruce Wayne was captured by Hugo Strange and led into Arkham City for the first time? There's none of that here. Aside from a few nifty gadgets, a fully explorable Batcave and new enemy types, there's no sense of innovation or experimentation.

However, what we're left with is the best combat system since *Jackie Chan: Stuntmaster*, and a rogues gallery that remains impressive no matter how many times you have to beat up the same old villains and their goons. Boss battles have been improved again, becoming a much more tactical experience than we've seen in previous games. *Origins* opens with Batman unleashing an almighty beatdown upon Killer Croc before setting you loose upon the rest of Gotham's criminal underworld. The story is smart and engaging, the voice acting surprisingly decent, given the departure of the

now-iconic Conroy and Hamill. The Christmas setting is a lovely touch, with goons bedecked in Christmas hats, the tinsel and gaudy baubles sitting ill at ease with the city's gargoyles and gothic architecture. With spooky Christmas carols and festive tunes murmuring away in the background, it's like a retooled *Batman Returns* (prior to *Arkham Asylum*, the best Batman videogame ever made – and still a lot of fun on the SNES). It makes one feel very sorry for poor Alfred, spending Christmas Eve alone in the Batcave, with broody Bruce barely able to wish him a happy Christmas. And a 'thank you' every now and then wouldn't hurt, either...

In addition to the challenge rooms and Story Plus mode, *Arkham Origins* sees the introduction of a perfunctory online mode. This sees players split into two teams – Joker's gang vs Bane's gang – with two lucky players taking on the roles of Batman and Robin. The gangs try to wipe one another out, while our heroes pick off the villains as and when they can. It's functional enough, although the novelty is bound to wear off as quickly as that of the disappointing *Gotham City Impostors*. Expect a swathe of DLC and unlockable costumes to follow, including playable Deathstroke rooms and all-new Batsuits. The absolute best thing about *Arkham Origins* is the addition of the Adam West Batsuit. Beating the absolute snot out of a room full of heavily armed thugs is made infinitely more entertaining by having your angry, stubbly Batman dressed like the mighty Adam West as he does so. Sadly, the 'biff', 'pow' and 'sock' is not included.

There's no hiding from the fact that *Batman: Arkham Origins* is a disappointment. It's repetitive, derivative and unwilling to take risks. There's still no driving the Batmobile or Batwing. It feels more like a set of add-on missions or DLC than a prequel in its own right, like a longer version of *Harley Quinn's Revenge*. That said, it is tremendously addictive fun, full of action, Easter Eggs and incredibly satisfying super-heroics. Stepping into the boots of the Bat remains as exciting as ever – it's just a shame that there's not a little more originality to his *Origins*.

Joel Harley

RATING ★★★★★★★★





BEYOND: TWO SOULS

Developer: Quantic Dream
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Director: David Cage
Writer: David Cage
Platform: PS3
Release Date: Out Now

If *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* is one end of the video game storytelling spectrum, *Beyond: Two Souls* is right at the other. One tells its narrative purely through gameplay, while this title explains events through more traditional film and television storytelling, but with a choice. Between cutscenes, quick time events and well recognised actors, it follows on from the likes of *Heavy Rain* but takes advantage of new ideas and mechanics.

You play as two characters, Jodie Holmes (Ellen Page) and a mysterious entity linked to her known as Aiden; an invisible and immaterial psychic being which she communes with to grant powers. Cutting back and forth between various stages in her life in non-linear fashion, you see how the world responded to Jodie's actions, and how she became connected to Nathan Dawkins (Willem Dafoe) and the military.

As with *Fahrenheit* and *Heavy Rain*, how the story is told and the level of interactivity is a major draw for the title, along with the acting. While not SquareEnix level, cutscene graphics, humans and environments have a very genuine feel and help to give the title an edge over others of its kind. Minor details and the designs of the environments are especially worthy of praise, not just due to the level of work put into them but how they can be interacted with. Hidden details such as a small knife embedded in a tire, or the headlines of a newspaper can lead you to unexpected

information or actions by the characters. Along with being a very compelling tale the fact the story is told in a professionally structured non-linear manner, explaining how each point comes about in turn, adds an additional drive to see what happens next.

The actual mechanics themselves are far from the most impressive ones to be given to a title, it's how the world reacts to them and the choices you make which give the game impact. At many points you have the opportunity for Aiden to truly abuse his powers or take events on a very different path, especially during stages when Jodie is homeless and during her childhood. The downside is that these don't offer as much re-playability as most multiple choice games would have, and the quick-time interactions can easily become tedious for those not fond of them. Furthermore, the slow pacing or lack of answers at times can prove to be a major point of frustration if you're playing in bursts.

Beyond: Two Souls should be treated as more of an interactive story rather than a video game, but an excellently told, well developed and extremely fascinating one none the less. It's definitely worth the time of anyone who values story and doesn't mind a lack of gameplay in places.

Callum Shephard

RATING ★★★★★★★★ B



DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION DIRECTOR'S CUT

Developer: Eidos Montreal
Publisher: Square Enix
Platform: PC, PS3, Xbox 360, Wii U
Release Date: Out Now

Originally released in 2011, Eidos' acclaimed hit returns with a director's cut consisting of the improved main game and the original DLC. Playing as professional Batman impersonator

Adam Jensen, it is your job to investigate a crime that ended with you horribly scarred and your lover kidnapped. With new revelations at every turn, and political emotions boiling over from the use of cybernetic enhancements, Jensen finds the world is far from a safe or simple place...

Ultimately a touched up version of the original game, *Deus Ex* remains a very solid FPS with RPG elements. The art direction, mechanics and plot all worked to a great degree and remain strong points here. The setting, art direction and abilities system are all expertly designed, as are the rewards for scouring through areas for items. You're normally working with limited supplies, but it's what you choose to unlock which ultimately works the best. With abilities covering a broad spectrum, you can easily customize Jensen to everything from a sneaky hacker to a bullet sponge of a fighter.

One of *Human Revolution's* major improvements relates to these abilities. The much-criticised boss battles are now much more open and offer angles beyond mere direct combat, with areas having been completely redesigned to offer things beyond just an outright brawl. Fighting against Barrett especially is infinitely more interesting, with options from hacking gun-turrets to hit and run assaults available to the player. All of them now allow for far more control over how you approach the problems of the Tyrants.

While bosses are improved, the AI isn't so much. Despite being touted as a feature, there are few apparent differences with the original beyond one or two fewer goofs. Expect them to show less stunning incompetence, but more squad-based survivability. There are also few graphical improvements over the original, with some of the facial animations beginning to look stiff even only a few years after release.

This isn't to say *Human Revolution* is a bad title, and many other new additions do enhance it. The commentary especially is well worthwhile, giving great insight into the game's environments and stylised look. Another enhancement, unique to the Wii U, is the use of the gamepad for hacking, making one core element infinitely more enjoyable to play. The inclusion of a New Game+ is similarly fun for those wanting a massive power trip, giving you the chance to waltz around with full upgrades and a plasma cannon.

Human Revolution – Director's Cut is an outstanding title and enhances one of the best Square Enix products of this decade. While offering little to those who already own the original, it tweaks enough of the criticised problems to warrant a look and is a must-buy to anyone yet to purchase any incarnation of the game.

Callum Shephard

RATING ★★★★★★★★ S



STRANGE LOVES: HEX BOYFRIENDS

Writer: Lacy Wilson
Developer: Tin Man Games
Publisher: Tin Man Games
Platform: Android
Release Date: Out Now

The urban fantasy/paranormal romance genre is one that has been steadily growing for the last couple of decades or so. You know the drill; modern day settings, supernatural happenings bubbling on under the surface mixed up with the usual “boy meets girl” style story that’s been told since stories began. The success of both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Twilight* has broadened the audience so greatly that it’s almost mainstream these days, and can be found in everything; books, TV dramas, theatre productions and of course, phone apps.

Hex Boyfriends is an interactive adventure game book that you play on your phone. Those familiar with *Fighting Fantasy* and the like should be familiar with the format; rather than a regular linear novel, this is a book that changes depending on the choices that you make. You take the role of a young person at college, who is on the lookout for a hot new boyfriend. (The game let’s you play as a boy or a girl, but your character is a person who happens to be romantically attracted to men; the clue is in the name.) You happen to be a witch, and of course you end up dating someone with a similar interest. Some choices will end up with your death (dating is always tricky) and others will give you a much worse fate. Happy endings are possible, but like in

real life, you’ll have to work for it.

The mix of humour, romance and paranormal terror is very well done here. Though light and fun-filled, some of the scenes are genuinely sweet, whereas others work very hard to scare the reader. There is a smorgasbord of romantic and supernatural clichés on display here and that’s exactly what you should demand from this sort of thing; nothing too heavy, but it isn’t afraid to land the odd punch or two. Other Tin Man games have features that emulate the dice-rolling fun of adventure games books, and *Hex Boyfriends* doesn’t have these, as it is more focused on story-driven results than beating up monsters. This is the right call, and makes the story flow much more smoothly.

This is perfect for anyone looking to get the *Twilight* or *Charmed* fan in their lives to broaden their horizons a little more, and will also appeal to those fond of romantic fiction and supernatural stories. It’s deep enough to survive multiple replays and doesn’t have too much repetition between choices. Recommended for those looking for a bit of spooky fun.

Ed Fortune

RATING ★★★★★★★★ 9



STAR TREK CATAN: FEDERATION SPACE

Designer: Klaus Teuber
Publisher: Mayfair Games
Release Date: Out Now

One of the surprise hits of last year was *Star Trek Catan*, a branded version of the popular geek classic, *The Settlers of Catan*. For those of you who don’t know it, *Catan* is a resource management board game that is all about building roads and cities by trading and collecting cards. The *Star Trek* version swapped roads for starships and cities for

starbases, but stayed true to the spirit of the original game. It also added additional depth to an established classic by providing ‘support cards’, each one named after a character from *The Original Series*.

Star Trek Catan – Federation Space is the first expansion for the game, and it takes a great idea and improves on it. The set comes with some extra counters, an almanac and two new boards. In the core game, the planets you built starbases around were simply anonymous worlds that looked vaguely *Trekky*. In this new expansion, each planet on the board is based on a world Kirk and chums visited on the show. The set also comes with a thick almanac that handily tells you which world is which and why it’s included in the game. (Such information is not required to play; it’s just a bit of geeky fun.)

The boards are much better designed than the set-up in the core set. For a start, the larger the planet is, the more likely that world is going to pump out resources on a turn. This is a handy visual guide for new players, and makes one of the game’s core concepts very easy to grasp. In the core game, starbase placement is a bit of a free-for-all and it’s very easy to put a marker in the wrong place; in this expansion, those problems are solved as the places where you can build starbases are clearly shown on the board. Areas that can be used for trade (a crucial part of the game) are also made understandable at a glance. In

addition, certain key locations on the board can be captured in order to make winning more likely, and this drives conflict forward quite neatly.

This results in the game playing faster and much more smoothly even with new players; as everything is marked out, there’s less delay from slower players. Some of the randomness is lost in the process, but as it makes the game speedier and more fun, it’s a reasonable sacrifice to make. Overall, this is a great little expansion for an already very good game.

Ed Fortune

RATING ★★★★★★★★ 8



Retro BYTES

a look back at
the World of
Retro Gaming
by Chris Jackson



Crime & Punishment

Possibly inspired by binge-watching *Wentworth* and the vastly-superior *Orange Is The New Black* in just over seven days, we're spending this month's column banged up against our will to see what life is like inside one of gaming's most gruesome prisons. Come on, we'll have a right old time!

The Suffering

(Surreal Software, 2004, Xbox/PS2/PC)

We realise this game isn't really that old, but by the time you're reading this magazine the Xbox One and PS4 will be on their way to stores across the world, making 2004 two whole hardware generations ago which pretty much qualifies the Xbox and PS2 as retro consoles. It does in Starburst, anyway. Especially seeing as it opens up more than ten years worth of extra subject matter for these pages.

For a game that was released less than

ten years ago, it's surprising how quickly *The Suffering* has been forgotten. Selling around 1.5 million copies and spawning a sequel (subtitled *Ties That Bind*) in 2005, the franchise was deemed successful enough that there were even plans for a movie adaptation at one point. With the movie quickly falling into development hell, and gamers at the time focusing their attentions towards the newly-released Xbox 360 and the upcoming hardware offerings from Sony and Nintendo, *The Suffering* as a franchise didn't quite get enough of a chance to build a fan base large enough to help it survive into the next generation. Everything went quiet, and the story of *The Suffering* was over. But what a story it was.

Set in and around the grounds of Abbott State Penitentiary on Carnate Island, players take control of a man known only as Torque. Suffering from hallucinations and blackouts, Torque has been sentenced to death for the

murder of his ex-wife and two children, but he claims to have no memory of the events that lead to their demise. As if that wasn't difficult enough for him to deal with, he soon discovers that he has been locked up in one of the most hellish places on earth.

Located in a remote spot ten miles off the coast of Maryland with no regular ferry service, Carnate Island has seen an awful lot of action over the years. 17th century Puritan travellers were scared off the island after a mysterious mass tragedy led to the disbanding of their community. A wealthy family sought to make the island their home and built a huge mansion only to be so deeply traumatised by an "undisclosed incident" that they immediately moved away. The mansion was later turned into a mental asylum run by a depraved scientist called Dr Killjoy who would use the inmates in all manner of barbaric experiments. The US government acquired the land after the asylum had closed down, and used the building as a WWII prisoner of war camp, after which the building fell back into the hands of the state of Maryland who decided to use the old mansion/asylum/POW camp as a jail. Sounds exactly like the sort of place you'd want to end your life, doesn't it?

On the night of Torque's arrival, a huge earthquake sets an army of monsters free on the island. After the tremors die down, Torque escapes his cell through the conveniently-broken door and begins his mission to cross the island and escape alive. This sudden inclusion of monsters might seem a bit out of place at first, but we soon learn that the game's enemies are physical manifestations of the island's former horrors, bringing its history to life with horrifying consequences.

The game itself is a *Silent Hill*-style survival horror, but with much more action. Some of the enemies hurtle towards you at surprising speeds, while others lumber around shooting endless rounds from their fleshy seemingly-genetically-engineered in-built multi-turreted gun sacks. That sounds more revolting than I thought it would now I've written it down. My apologies. Torque blasts his way through the prison using a variety of weapons and occasionally turning into a superhuman version of himself, taking the odd time-out to find switches or hunt around the many optional side areas for much-needed supplies. Imagine an early version of what we all wanted *Resident Evil 5* to turn out like, and you've pretty much got it.

Throughout the course of the game, Torque will encounter some of the more notorious residents from the island's past, as well as some of the current officers and inmates who are also trying to save themselves. Some of these will be helpful, others not so much, but interacting with these characters is critical to the game's morality system. Will you help that inmate cross the courtyard to safety, or leave him to fend for himself? Or will you spare him the misery of even trying by just smacking him over the head right here right now? The choices you make will affect the game in a couple of ways - if you save that person he might give you a reward, but if you kill him then he won't be around to return the favour. Your overall morality rating is based on your actions during these encounters and ultimately affects the ending of the game. Players' choices even carry over to affect the events of the sequel if your save files are on the same memory card, and I bet that's a sentence nobody's needed to write for a while.

While cutscenes and encounters with other inmates form a large part of the actual story, there's way more to it if you take the time to hunt around. Telephone calls and radio broadcasts offer deeper glimpses into what's really going on, hallucinations and flashbacks fill us in on Torque's personal history, and thorough exploration also reveals notes which can be read in an unlockable archive.

Having thought about it, maybe the sheer depth of the game has got something to do with its "cult classic" (otherwise known as "it's really good but hardly anyone remembers it") status. A game about prisons, slavery, medical experiments, the death penalty and mental illness doesn't sound like a barrel of laughs really. But if you're in the mood for something that will keep your brain engaged at the same time as giving you endless otherworldly souls to tear apart, visiting the corridors of Abbott State Penitentiary today is still as nerve-racking as it ever was.

Blimey, I feel all weird from spending so long thinking about how horrible Carnate



Island is. Let's move on to something a bit more jolly...

Rapsallion

(Bug Byte Software, 1984, ZX Spectrum)

The King of Hassle Castle (that's you) has been relieved of his crown and imprisoned in his own dungeon by arch enemy Rapsallion The Rogue. But here comes the fairy princess! She turns the King into a bird so that he can fly away and take back his kingdom. Now this is more like it. A bit of light-hearted just-about-prison-based whimsy to end this month's column on a high note.

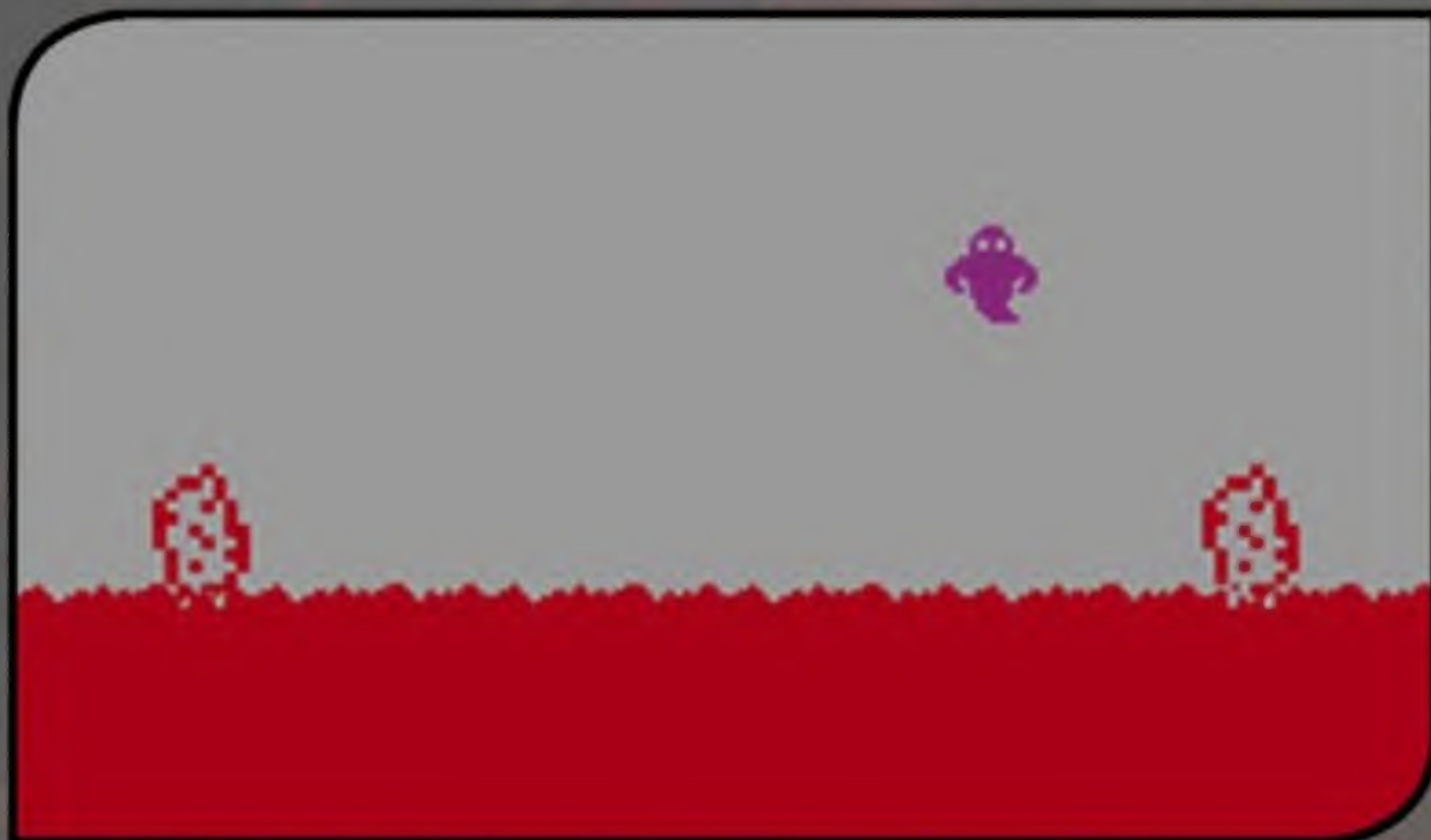
Each screen features a single "room" of the castle or its grounds, each containing a variety of hazards and obstacles that need to be navigated around. Players take the form of either a bird or a fly, and can change between the two at the cost of one life per change. Birds and flies are susceptible to different enemies (flies get caught in cobwebs but birds go straight through them, for example), and getting killed will turn you into a ghost. This

is advantageous because you can now roam around each screen without fear of being killed again, but you won't be able to collect any of the necessary items until you return to the scene of your last death and regain your physical body. Absolutely mental.

It gets stranger though. The game is split into three parts - first you will need to find a key to enter the castle's labyrinth, then you need to find the three wizards who guard the drawbridge, and finally make your way to the master chamber where you will come face to face with Rapsallion himself. To make your way through the castle, you will need to find all the little pixies who provide you with useful information and necessary items. While the map remains the same every time you play, the pixies are randomly generated so even if you think you've mastered the layout of the castle you're still going to have a challenge on your hands.

Some of the castle's rooms are ingenious for their time. In "Mystery Maze", the room is completely dark except for the occasional flash of light which gives you a brief glimpse of which way you need to go. Pathways differ in size to make the 'bird/fly' problem come into play while you're trying to work out which direction you need to go. Things get really confusing towards the end of the game when flags and bricks act as extra exits, forcing players to find their way back on track from rooms they didn't even know existed. To add to the misery, some rooms even warp the player around the screen just for fun. There's a method to the madness if you pay close attention though, and you're never truly "stuck".

They say games were simpler back then, but it isn't always true. While *Rapsallion* might not be as well-known as *Manic Miner* (also published by Bug Byte one year previously), its wealth of ideas and big colourful Teletext-style graphics are still a joy to behold. Get your emulator fired up and go reclaim your castle!





ROLL FOR DAMAGE



Ed Fortune guides you into the realm of tabletop gaming



which will bite you on the bottom in the long run. For adults, it's a fun game about bidding, bluffing and resource management, but it's also a handy tool for teaching younger people why saving is often better than spending.

For those looking to stretch their imagination a bit further than simple world domination, there is the rather splendid *Dixit*. The idea is pretty simple, each player draws six cards, and each card depicts an image. One player then tells a story based on one of the cards in their hand. Everyone then picks a card that they think matches the storyteller's card, and these cards are put in a separate pile and shuffled and placed face up. Bets are then placed on which card belonged to the storyteller. The better you can describe and work out descriptions, the faster you win. This is a great game for families because it's simple, I've played it with 6 year olds and 60 year olds and both of them got it straight away. It also opens people up and gets their creativity going; conversations tend to continue long after the game has been put away, which is the mark of a good ice-breaking game.

For those who prefer their games to involve dice, counters and a board, there's always *Settlers of Catan*. It's a trading/resource juggling/settlement game, and again, does the sort of job that *Monopoly* is meant to, just in a way that isn't boring. The board is divided into hexes, with each hex representing a resource. Players place road and settlement counters on the hexes, and each hex also has numbers on it; at the top of a player's turn, dice are rolled and if the number on the dice matches the number on the hex (and the player has a

It is the season for giving gifts, and in this humble correspondent's opinion, the best gift you can probably give someone is a game they can play with their friends. Let's turn the anti-social games console off for the holiday, and instead do something that will bring people together. The best tactic is to avoid the old fashioned games many of us were raised with; most families will have long ago cemented their opinions on the likes of *Monopoly* and *Backgammon*. Instead, use the time to introduce things they haven't played to your loved ones.

A good game for families and beginners is the classic *Ticket to Ride*. The aim of the game is to build the most successful railroad. At the start of the game, you pick a number of routes (for example Chicago to New Orleans) and then try to collect the right types of cards in order to complete your route. Of course, everyone else is doing the same, and these routes tend to clash. As no one knows which routes you're pursuing, there's a heavy element of bluffing and outright fibbing. Complete the most valuable routes to win the game. It combines luck, strategy and banter, though if you take it too seriously you can work out optimal strategies, which just makes it all the more fun. Certainly it's

more strategic and interesting than, say, *Monopoly*, especially as each turn taken has an impact on all the players. It also comes in different 'flavours' of board, for those of you who'd rather play on a map of Europe than the United States.

Speaking of *Monopoly* (and maps for that matter), those who are bored with that old chestnut may want to consider the German boardgame, *Powergrid*. Designed by the award winning Friedemann Friese, this complicated looking but surprisingly simple game actually does what *Monopoly* only claims to; it's about seizing corporate control and being the sole controller of a particular resource. As the name suggest, the commodity in question is electrical power; you and your friends vie for control of a nation's power stations. The game is German, so the default map is Germany though other boards are available (the UK map includes tidal power options). The aim of the game is to provide power to as many different cities as you can. Players bid on types of power stations, some more efficient than others. At the start of the game, the less useful stations are the first available to buy, so you can either save (and do without) or be tempted by cheap but inefficient power



settlement on that square) they get that resource. Players need to collect resources in order to build more settlements, roads, armies, etc. Each of these are worth points, get enough points and you win. On the roll of a seven, a special counter called 'the robber' comes into play, and it allows the person who rolled that dice to steal resources from other players and hamper their progress. A lot of interaction comes from players trying to trade resources, and 'Wood for Sheep' is a common request and joke amongst Catan players. It is very quick to play (each game takes about an hour) and because every roll of the dice may mean something happens to you, it means you remain throughout, which is very handy when dealing with people with low attention spans. The rules are simple enough for almost anyone to grasp, and who doesn't want to build their own city? It also comes in *Star Trek* flavour, which features extra rules for using Kirk and the gang, as well as a unique map set that mimics the original show. *Star Trek Catan* is a slightly less intuitive version of the game it's based on, but makes up for that by having lots of tiny starships to play with. There are plenty of other variants as well, but the basic set is easy to find and easy to play.

Munchkin is a bit of an odd choice to give to the non-gamer, as a lot of the humour of the game is derived from its in-joke gaming culture nature. I've added it to this list because the gameplay is so much fun and most of the jokes are funny even if you don't know what they're parodying. Game play is pretty simple; you begin the game by drawing cards, and these tend to be either treasure or monsters. Treasure makes it easier to kill the monsters, and every time you kill a monster, you go up a level. First person to level ten, wins. However, the deck is stacked with lots



of cards that modify this. For example, the elf card makes it easier for you to win if you help others out; which means people start turning down your help. Other cards modify monsters, making it easier or harder to defeat the beasties. It's all about getting one up on your fellow players, but turn-about is fair play, so rather than stropping, the victimised player just seeks good humoured revenge. Add to all that the fact that every single card is filled with silly pictures and hilarious text and the results tend to be quite fun. *Munchkin* comes in a LOT of flavours; Zombie, Western, Space, Horror, etc, and

they're all compatible with each other. At the time of going to press, there isn't a regency era version, but give it time.

Ricochet Robots is one of those fiendishly simple games that takes very little effort to get your head around and is different every time. The board is set up in a way so it's random every time, and the aim of the game is to work out how to get one of the coloured counters (the robots) to a certain place on the board in as few moves as possible. As certain markings on the board mean that the robot will 'ricochet' this is not as simple as it sounds. Everyone plays at the same time; you look at the board and try to calculate in your head the most efficient route. Once you think you've got it, you announce the number of moves you reckon you can make it in, and a sandtimer is turned over. The other players then have until the sand runs out to best your claim. The result is almost always hilarious as players try to outdo each other. We've played it with as many as twelve people in the room, and it gets better the more people there are who can see the board. Some people dream of being able to afford a huge mansion with a life-sized chess board, I dream of a mansion with a life-sized *Ricochet Robots* set-up, it would be funnier.

So there you go, a modest collection of games you could happily give to any non-gaming friend and expect them to have fun. It may not get them into boardgaming as a hobby, but if they get the chance to play any of these, they'll certainly stop thinking boardgames are boring.

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Mobled Soul

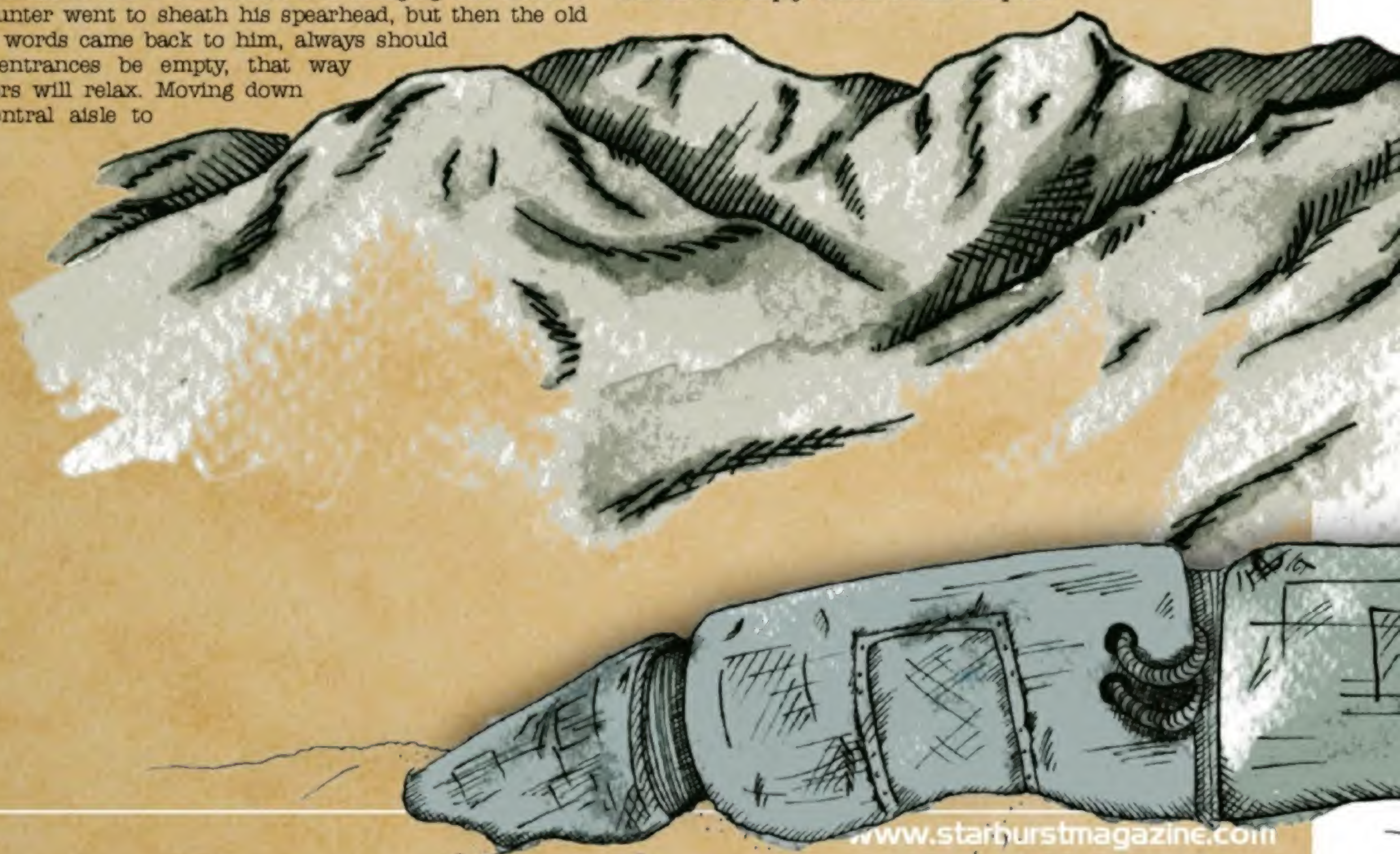
By Scott Devon

The hunter forced his way across the uncertain surface towards the trapped train, each step sending splinters through the ice. The train lay half exposed like the body of some ancient beast broken upon the world, while the front carriages dived down to an unknown depth. Stopping for a moment the hunter knelt and examined the animal tracks in a patch of snow, the foot was clearly visible, and to either side more marks where the thing's wings would have rested. Someone or thing must have prowled this ground before the dawn. One of them? Perhaps, but these were larger, different than any he'd seen before, strange or maybe they were just fake tracks to keep others out. As the hunter stood the wind shifted, and he caught the near extinct taste of metal on his tongue, he smiled at it savouring the experience, letting the bitter tang roam around his mouth. He rested the stone spear against his leg, flexed his fingers, made his decision and pressed on towards the train. How long, he thought, before this thing too was gone? Taken, like the world, by that unexplored dark in whose arms light was but a legend. And what if he were wrong and this was not the place of answers? What then, what then indeed? Forcing his doubts away the hunter reached the back carriage of the train, and found the ice there was thin enough to break. He gripped the door handle and pulled, but only managed to cut his hand through the glove. So he wrapped it in his spare scarf, and after three more hard tugs the door cracked open. He pushed his hood back so he had peripheral vision, wedged the door open with a stone, and stepped inside.

Every seat was shredded, and their innards cast carelessly adrift by a search that had hopefully been in vain. The hunter stiffened for a second before seeing the rust on the exposed springs and the tracks of dust upon the tables, everything undisturbed in this ruined state. This savaging was historic. The hunter went to sheath his spearhead, but then the old man's words came back to him, always should your entrances be empty, that way invaders will relax. Moving down the central aisle to

the far door the hunter pressed his face to the glass, but it was too cracked and stained for anything beyond to be seen, and no sound came from the other side. So he simply made ready, steadied himself, gripped the door handle and pulled. It came open with a scraping, loud and long in that breathless air, and on the other side the bodies began.

It was a sleeper carriage, and each body was laid respectfully in its own bunk. Even some of the little curtains were still intact, drawn tight against the day. The hunter waited in case some seemingly dead body's breath might mist the air, but there was none, just the stillness and the trails of frost that were everywhere. But as his eyes adjusted further to the low light the hunter began to see that each body had not lain here the same time. The dead nearer to him still had some small water in their skin; still had their eyes, dry hair out of yellow scalps. While those further away were just skin and bone and then just bone. The scent of dust and dying flesh was everywhere in this world without worms. The hunter pulled his scarf up over his nose, as he moved through the carriage casting his eyes over every corpse until he reached the door at the far end. This time the window was clear, but he could see that all else was flooded. If the answer still existed then it was in this sleeper. The hunter moved to where the oldest body was laid, so old that the bones themselves had begun to grey. Lifting the skeleton up the hunter checked under the pillow and sheets and mattress and felt the curtains for any filling but there was nothing. He did this again with the second bunk where the skeleton still had two teeth way in the back, but again the answer was absent. He searched each bunk as thoroughly, even as the bodies became more putrid he still lifted and searched and frisked but found nothing. Then he checked beneath each bed, checked the overhead racks, pulled up the metal floor squares and searched beneath. He searched the door and walls tapping for hollow spots, then in desperation he cut open those stomachs that remained and reached inside, but all was empty. Which meant his prize



lay in one of the sunken carriages, and was therefore as beyond his reach as hope is to a dead heart. The hunter sat on the only empty bunk, put his head in his hands and cried, but then as if by some internal alchemy his black turned to red as a rage came over him fed by defeat. The hunter stood and strode to the door beyond which the flooded carriage lay, grabbed his spear and smashed it through the glass, closed his eyes and waited for that eternal cold to take him.

A puddle of water was all that drained from the door, and when the water stopped the hunter saw how the trick had worked. The carriage beyond was dry, but someone had filled the space between the two glass panes with water, and salted it so it wouldn't freeze. With resurrected caution the hunter moved to look upon the new carriage, and there he saw a book, leather bound and wrapped in plastic, upon the floor. The hunter forced the door open and removed the relic from its plastic shroud. He opened it and heard the ice crystals crack as he peeled back the first page and began to read.

It all began with the mobled soul. We'd invented this kind of plasma-dye, that once injected clung to a person's energy, and when they died we could track wherever that energy went. It was revolutionary; we were finally going to know. The man we injected was called Adam Williams; he was in a coma from which there'd be no waking, car crash. So we injected him, turned the life support off and there it was clear as clear. We saw the energy leave him, hover for a moment as if uncertain and then rise up into the sky and go out beyond our atmosphere, we tracked it for weeks, and his energy came to rest on a world that was hitherto unknown to us. And so, of course, we followed it. We built a ship, and set sail for that world believing that some great truth would soon be known to those lucky enough to be alive. Yet the world to which we came was covered in lifeless ice.

*Nothing moved there save the wind,
no green, no buildings or even
ruins could we find.*

But this was not a dead world; it was the world of death. For in all our history there was perhaps one question we never did consider, if the angels of death, the grim reapers are real then where is their home planet?

We saw the first one soon enough, just a black v in the sky as the then unknown thing glided towards us in total silence. And as it came closer our excitement grew for we thought we had found life at last, and it didn't occur to us to arm ourselves such was our joy. It must have been eight foot from toe to tip and ten from wing to wing, and no skin just black bones. Our captain spoke to it, and the reaper tilted its head as though listening then extended its hand for our captain to shake. Without hesitation the captain took it, he never even had time to scream, and the thing seemed to flare red as it absorbed him. So we ran like children from the dark, ran back to our ships but their energies too had been taken, so we hid trying to make the shadows our shield. There was six hundred and three crew members on our ship when we arrived, I think maybe half still live. Some have been taken by the reapers and forced to breed, they may be the lucky ones, for others went away to the far north or south looking for somewhere they might release their own energies without fear of theft. I'm giving this book to one such group, they plan to take the all-terrain train and travel north until the ice becomes too treacherous to trust. Seventeen of them are going, men and women, who knows perhaps there's a place where reapers fear to go, and those seventeen may produce children of their choosing in a land where some blacker thing breathes, where death itself might die.

The hunter sat back with the book in his lap, and thought of all those souls that were now slaves to a reaper's guts. How the truth burned. Yet the only way to kill death was to starve it, but what if the reapers feed on a soul whose death was so hard that it had gone insane? What would happen if they fed upon the mad? The hunter knew there were still people left that could be used, if he could stomach their screams, and surely that's a small price to set the rest free. The hunter stood and began again across the ice.



Art by Rylan Cavell

Paul Mount's



This month we take Orphan Black into the bosom of the TV Zone family and hunt down the second series of CBBC's impressive Wolfblood...

If you're anything at all like me - and I hope to God you're not for your own sake - you might have occasionally found yourself wondering what a BBC TV drama would look like if it was a big, high-concept glossy show full of beautiful people, fast cars, fabulous apartments and really smashing clothes. You know, a bit like a glitzy American drama but with a British sensibility. Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, I give you *Orphan Black*, an original BBC America commission (originally developed by the Canadian Film Centre) which at least goes part way towards answering that burning question in a series which is a bit naff and tawdry, and also hilariously and obviously filmed in a Canada which has never looked less like America. Yet curiously it's also quite good.

It's not especially big but it is quite entertaining which is why I've found myself quite taken with *Orphan Black* which has pitched up on BBC3 in the UK as a refreshing change from its usual diet of greasy documentary strands with titles like *My Fat Teen Arse On Holiday* and *Spotty Herberts*. It has a slight whiff of tackiness about it - you can't help feeling a bit grubby watching it - but it's dominated by an intriguing central mystery which has got enough going for it to bring at least this viewer back (although its American figures tumbled after a decent start and no-one seems much interested in the BBC3 screenings). It's also packed to the rafters with quite unattractive people doing quite unattractive things to one another and in a way it's become a bit like a TV car crash

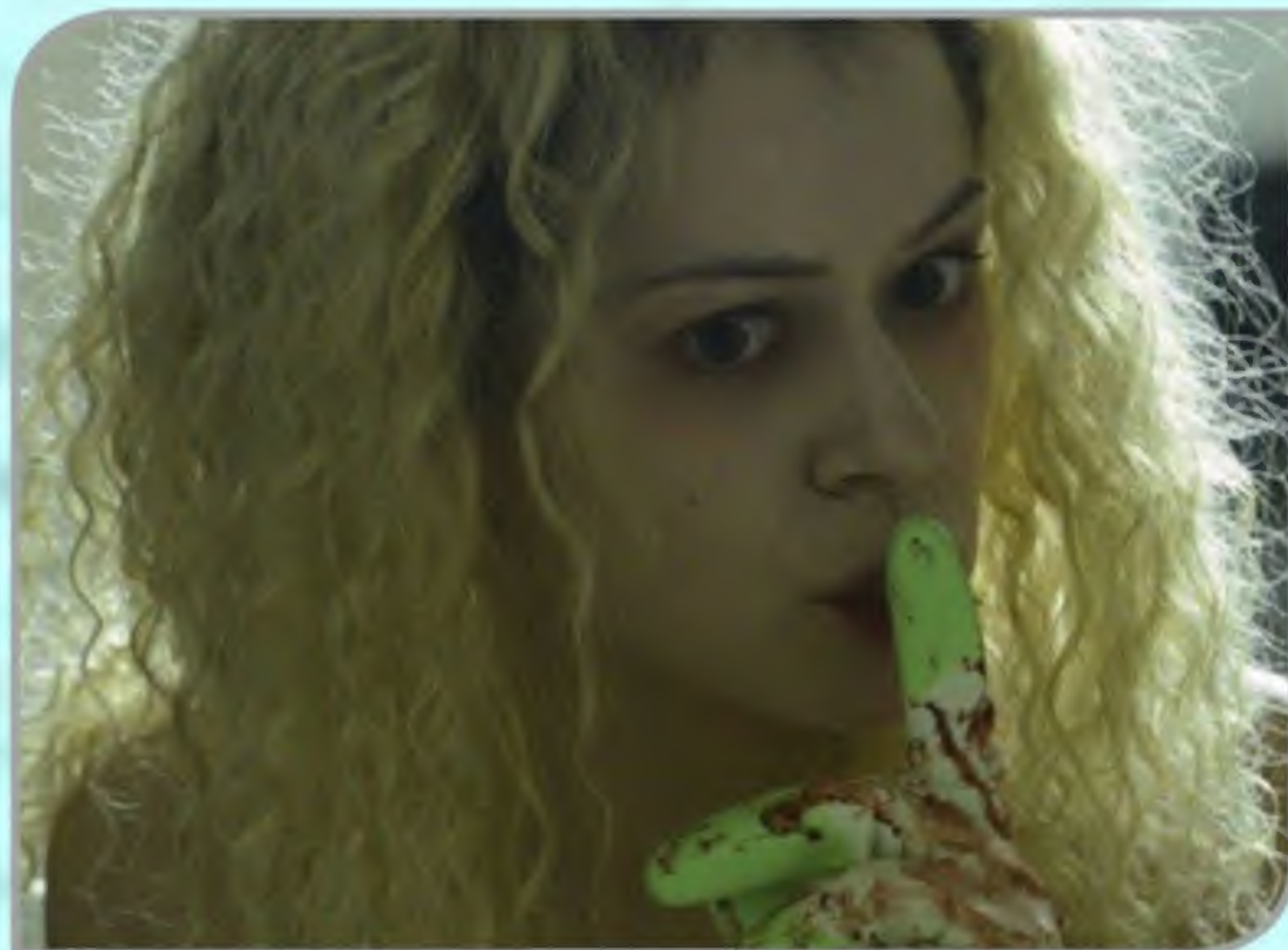
in that it's hard to look away from even though it's clear not much good can really come from sticking with it.

I'm reminded very briefly of *Ringer*, the failed 2011/12 Sarah Michelle Gellar (Buffy!!!) show in which one woman stepped into the life of her identical - but much better-connected - twin sister. But there the comparison ends so you might wonder why I made it. *Orphan Black* stars hard-faced Tatiana Maslany (I wouldn't

fancy bumping into her in a dark alley - or even a well-lit one, for that matter) as Sarah Manning, a cheap con woman who returns to New York (yeah, *right...*) having fled from her drug-dealer boyfriend and intent on re-establishing contact with her young daughter who has been placed with a foster mother. On the subway she sees a woman throw herself in front of a train; the woman, Beth Childs, is a dead ringer (in every sense) for Sarah who nicks the woman's discarded handbag and decides to assume her doppelganger's identity in order to access her money so she can get her daughter back and flee the country with her own camp foster brother Felix. But it turns out that Beth was a cop on suspension for shooting a civilian. Sarah finds herself embroiled not only into the Police investigation but also Beth's personal life and a conspiracy which involves a number of women all identical to Sarah/Beth and all living very different and very volatile lives. Sarah discovers that she and the others are the result of an illegal cloning experiment and as the series progresses Sarah gets drawn deep into a dark and dangerous mystery and realises that someone is determined to destroy the clones one by one and that someone has already been ruthlessly offed.

Orphan Black is enjoyable twaddle which rattles through its implausible story with considerable gusto. It's an occasionally-ropey production (surely they could have found some part of Canada which looked at least a *bit* more like New York?) but the scenario itself is ingeniously well-layered and as the series wears on new characters and situations crop up which only serve to deepen the





Direction T-shirts auditioning for *The X Factor* but that they're actually intelligent people who can respond to quality imaginative story-telling and identify with believable, well-rounded characters. In many ways *Wolfblood* is the latest in a long line of children's fantasy drama which goes way back (even further than me) and whilst I grew up and thrived on shows like *The Tomorrow People*, *Timeslip* and *Ace of Wands*, *Wolfblood* is streets ahead of them all, in terms of both its production (obviously) and its scripts, performances and the way it's not afraid of the challenge and at times even potentially disturb its audience.

Series two picks up three months after the end of the first series which saw Rhydian, who had returned to his wild wolfblood family at the end of the first series, return to Stoneybridge having fled his 'pack'. Rhydian settles back to school and human life but a new young wild female wolfblood, Jana, turns up and Maddy, Rhydian and their friends quickly help her adjust to human life and craft a cover story to enable her to enrol at their school. But Jana has a secret; she's been sent by Alric, the Alpha Male of Rhydian's pack to bring him back at any cost. But like Rhydian, Jana finds the human world too engaging and stays in Stoneybridge until called back to the wild by Rhydian's mother to become the new leader of the pack now that Alric had been exiled.

Season one was good, solid stuff but season two has really upped its game with even tighter writing (series creator Debbie Moon scripts the key opening and

central mystery. Maslany is a feisty lead much given to striding about in her undies as Sarah (which isn't too disagreeable) although her "English" accent seems to wander back and forth across the Atlantic. Maslany is actually better as the other clones - dizzy "soccer mom" Alison, geeky biology student Cosima and fanatical self-harming assassin Helena; the actress is clearly having fun creating each of her alter egos and the show copes well with the need to have two or sometimes three version of Sarah in the same room at the same time.

Orphan Black's rough-at-the-edges approach and look actually gives it an advantage over your glossier, more typical US network fare. It's occasionally a bit ugly (both visually and from a story/character point of view) but it's distinctive and original enough to hold the attention across its ten-episode first season run (a second season will turn up next year) and it's good to see that BBC America, at least, is willing to give the benefit of the doubt to quirkier, darker and determinedly less safe TV drama than its British counterpart.

WOLFBLOOD

I wrote briefly last year (issue 383) about *Wolfblood*, CBBC's kids drama about a family of tame human/wolf hybrids (they're called 'wolfbloods' and not werewolves) living in a remote Northumbrian community, and the struggles of the family's young daughter Maddy and village newcomer (and fellow wolfblood) Rhydian as they try to live a normal life of schoolwork, playground crushes and howling at the moon. It was

a cracking little series, beautifully and intelligently written and acted, all set in an atmospheric and pleasingly-bleak rural environment. The second season of thirteen episodes has just finished its run and I'm not going to apologise for finding it one of the most affecting, sophisticated and ultimately heart-breaking pieces of TV I've seen in ages. It's a kid's show first and foremost, of course, but like the very best children's television it doesn't assume its audience are drooling idiots wearing One



closing instalments) and a much more intriguing serialised narrative. Threads and arcs are allowed to develop across the episodes, from the constant battle to persuade the wolfbloods to embrace their wild roots, friendships and loyalties tested and strengthened and, perhaps most interestingly, the increasing risk of the outside world discovering the existence of wolfbloods. Child actors can be an unpredictable breed (ie crap) but the cast of *Wolfblood* are, without exception, extraordinary - no mean feat considering some of the heavy emotional trauma their characters suffer and the growing pains they endure across the series. The excellent Aimee Kelly returns as Maddy, a troubled fourteen year-old with a crush on fellow wolf blood Rhydian (Ben Lockwood) and whilst they're the key characters they're matched and often outclassed by the supporting teens. Newcomer (and Kylie Minogue looky-likey) Leona Kate Vaughan gives wild Jana an astonishing depth and energy in a performance of dazzling confidence. Similarly Louisa Connolly-Burnham has brought an incredible maturity to her portrayal as Maddy's slightly geeky best friend Shannon who, this year, has had to cope with the playground fall-out from the discovery of her secret recordings of Maddy's family's wolfblood activities, her own sense of isolation and depression and, ultimately, her blossoming into a young woman with her first chaste kiss at a school disco.

Where the first season tended to dawdle a little and the stakes were never very high, series two has been a much more action-packed series, a constant



through line being the risk of the wolfblood secret being exposed either by nosey fellow-pupils or else the scientific community. There's a sort of sense of unease about the series, especially in the latter half, as it becomes clear that events are slowly moving out of Maddy and co's control and the final episode threatens to bring everyone's cosy world crashing down around their ears.

I'll make no apologies for banging the drum at length this month for *Wolfblood* whether you've seen it or not - and I

daresay most of you haven't. But it's genuinely important that today's kids are given the opportunity to engage with well-written and well-made drama - *Wolfblood* is brought wonderfully and vividly to life even if the 'wolf' CGI is still a bit ropey. The BBC are to be commended in persevering with the genre when common sense (and viewing figures for kids' shows which these days rarely rise above half-a-million) suggest that they could easily get away with filling CBBC with cheap cartoons and noisy LE shows full of gormless pop stars. The last episode of this season of *Wolfblood* was as gut-wrenchingly emotional and powerful as any of the better-regarded *Doctor Who* episodes from the last few years and with a killer downbeat finale which seems to bring the show to a natural, if bittersweet conclusion. The good news for us big kids is that a third series has been commissioned and will air next Autumn. Spare a thought and, if you can, find some time for *Wolfblood* as you await your next fix of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* or *The Tomorrow People* or whatever else takes your fantasy fancy. *Wolfblood* may be aimed at kids but it really does show a clean pair of hairy heels to many more high profile, by-the-numbers shows, clearly created by committee and aimed cynically at a certain broad demographic. And it's certainly a damn sight better than *Atlantis*, but that's for a future column...



Next month: The verdict on *Doctor Who* at 50.

Say hello! Wave goodbye! Contact me at paul.mount@starburstmagazine.com

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it's only a movie

a column by Jordan Royce & The Zombaby



The GORETORIUM - Eli Roth attempts to drag Las Vegas to Hell...



Glasgow for another 6 months and then made the audacious leap to The Trocadero Centre in London. Despite my affinity for the north, trips to London did occur more frequently for the next three years. Then, as almost a precursor to the sad decline of the centre from a gamers' Mecca to a half deserted shell waiting patiently to morph into a Japanese pod hotel - there was a flood! **Alien War** was destroyed and was never to reopen as a permanent venue.

Now, before you say anything, I am aware of the passage of time, and the rose tinted glasses it can manufacture. I have been divorced a lot, and had a few hundred grand stolen by business partners since then. Experiences that can make the past your period of preference. Perhaps I am afflicted with iPhone syndrome, and maybe **Alien War** has become my first smart phone? But before Eli Roth announced his plans, nothing came close to that day in Glasgow. Don't get me wrong, in the last decade I have had the occasional "fix". But it was usually merely methadone. The Pasaje Del Terror at Blackpool tries but other than a passable "Exorcism" at the end, you just get chased by pikey looking "Freddy Kruegers" through an old pub painted black. My 9 year old daughter Katy was suitably terrified though (now that earned a sentence in the divorce papers!).

Over in the US the rise of the horror farm proved very successful. Eli Roth even admitted that a night at **Knott's Farm** (a berry farm. "Berries by day - Terror by night!" - they can have that blurb as a freebie) over a decade ago stayed with him and served as inspirational for the **Goretorium**. Sadly here in the UK another converted farm entitled **Spooky World** in Warrington provided me with a genuinely horrific experience, but only from a value for money perspective. I will spare you the review, but simply refer you to the episode of **Father Ted** entitled *Good Luck, Father Ted*, which features a venue called Funland. In a similar vein the main attraction at "**Spooky**" "**World**" involves being pulled around the farm on the back of a tractor in the freezing cold, whilst a fat farmer chases you in an ice cream truck, and a badly dressed *Spider-Man* drops down from a

Well I finally got to experience Eli Roth's **Goretorium** in Las Vegas. Any of you who listen to the **Starburst Radio Show** will be aware of my upset last year when Mister Roth opened his attraction at the Harmon Centre on the Vegas strip - five bloody days after I was there on holiday (Eli had obviously neglected to check my movements before finalising his opening date). It was designed to be the ultimate in *interactive horror experiences* (or "haunts" as they are referred to by gothic hipsters). You probably gathered by now that I am referring to it in a past tense...

I openly admit to having more genre obsessions than would be remotely deemed healthy. In amongst all the airships, wobbly horror heads, body horror, and other cool stuff - I get a real buzz from interactive horror. Now I don't really have the patience for full on live action role playing. I just love a quick twenty minutes of adrenaline boosting scares, and it's this sodding magazine's fault. My first experience (we are still talking about interactive horror), was way back in May 1992. John Major was unexpectedly still Prime Minister, but a bigger shock was yet to come.

After collecting **Starburst** Issue 165, and getting over my strop about Kennie's Newsagents writing my

surname on the cover in biro yet again, I nearly suffered a chest bursting experience. In the *Previews* section, just prior to the usual movie reviews was a *Coming Soon* announcement. Opening on the 18th April at The Arches complex in Glasgow was **Alien War**. Billed as "The ultimate haunted house experience", Gary Gillies and John Gorman had obtained a license from 20th Century Fox to use HR Giger's **Alien** designs in a walkthrough horror experience. Marines would guide you through a movie set where the creatures could strike at any moment. At the bottom of the page was just one image of the set - a rusty door. That was more than enough persuasion. Me and my mate Brian were off to Glasgow...

Due to the naiveties of youth I had not considered that there was a Russian Doll Paradigm in play herein having **Alien War** situated in Glasgow. Luckily we survived both interactive horror experiences, and **Alien War** turned out to be everything it said on the tin, and more. They even had fake punters that got savaged by *Aliens*, whose every movement and appearance were nailed to perfection. The cumulative effect shook off any sense of safety. Putting this in perspective I still consider **Aliens** to be the best genre sequel ever made (quick pause for the usual boring comments over **The Empire Strikes Back!**), and we were still a few weeks away from Fincher's stillborn foetus of a sequel. So just seeing those creatures in the "flesh", at the height of the franchise's popularity, was genuinely breathtaking. **Alien War** continued in

Spider-Zombaby





tree onto a net. There was a really long queue for this Haunted Hay Ride (their branding, not mine!). If I thought things could not get worse than this – I was wrong. A couple of years ago, on a trip to London I was flyer'd for another horror experience. Right next to the London Eye. After having to wait for two hours while the staff made certain the premises were not on fire, I entered **London's Death Trap**, at this stage totally unaware of the lethal quotient of irony present within the title. After being dragged through a load of pitch black rooms by some rubbish cockney am-dram rejects, we finally got to the interactive bit. There were three holes, in one of them was the key to the door out (yeah they ripped off **Flash Gordon**, and I was Peter Duncan). I clearly did not choose wisely as someone actually bit me. Bit me deep actually. Teeth marks. Full trip. When I say "Don't go there!", I am not giving you a sound byte from **The Jerry Springer Show**...

My quest for interactive horror utopia seemed to hit gold last year when **Hostel** director Eli Roth decided to open the "scariest, top of the line, most intense haunted house in the world." Wowzers! Even better, it was going to be in Las Vegas, and luckily I have an apartment there due to hitting the jackpot on a fruit machine several years ago. This was looking good. Apparently the **Goretorium** would be a closed down '60s Casino and Hotel called The Delmont. Sadly the proprietors have been murdering the guests, and indulging in a bite of cannibalism (do you get it? 'bite', because cannibals... never mind). Part of the attraction even featured a haunted chapel, which was available for the real deal. Why not get wed locked in the **Goretorium**?

Suffice to say I was pretty miffed that I

missed going in 2012 by only a few weeks. But this was a long game and I was willing to wait...

Fast forward to September 2013 and it's Vegas break time once again. Guess what was at the top of the list of things to do? No. Not hookers! The only hooks I wanted to see were being used to torture people (please don't quote that out of context.). Better still I had a new arrival. For my birthday only a few weeks earlier The Zombaby had arrived. His name is Zach, he is undead, very little trouble, and a puppet – although we try not to use the "P" word around him. He had to come along, even though the maids flat-out refused to clean the apartment once they caught sight of him. Even Starburst Shauna had flown out with us – Utopia was in sight.

The **Goretorium** had an entrance that belied the quality experience inside. I was initially gutted – it looked like a Blackpool side show. I need not have worried. The experience was just mind blowing. A horror experience soaked in Eli Roth's DNA. The acting was solid, and the visual effects were superb. At one stage I pressed a button that sent some poor sod through a flesh mangler. There were people submerged in washing machines. Heads were severed in front of us. Every conceivable act of violence is perpetrated, and achieved mostly through old school practical effects. The set design was way beyond anything I had ever seen, outside of a genuine movie set. If inventive use of gore or body horror is your thing the **Goretorium** was probably the best art exhibition you could wish to see. The thing that really surprised me (and probably explains the \$40 ticket price) is the sheer volume of actors (more than in the entirety of **Batman Returns**). When we walked into the aforementioned, and fully attended, wedding chapel it was packed. This was followed by a wedding reception where 20 live zombies were tearing into the guests and devouring their flesh. I am not remotely exaggerating. This was genuinely disturbing. Not too sure what the "menstrual cocktail" was all about either! This was a huge pile of fun, but I can see some people being really beyond freaked out by this. Actually the sad pair of chumps in front of me weren't coping that well; they wouldn't look at the actors and kept walking into walls. Unlike the usual end to these sort of attractions the **Goretorium** led you into a cool, horror themed bar that had simply the best view I have ever seen. Overlooking the top end of the strip, this bar was equally skilled in its execution. Not just a few ghost train skulls, this was really pro. My only problem was keeping Zombaby under control (he was seriously popular with the **Goretorium** staff!), and

Starburst Shauna away from the straight vodka. Happily the **Goretorium** was the fix I had been craving.

Unfortunately this would be a one shot deal. Whereas last year I missed the opening by one week, sadly the opposite was true this time around. After being in chapter 11 bankruptcy for three months, Eli Roth attended the closing ceremony on October 2nd. How could a horror experience this good fail? Especially with a noted member of the *splat pack* on board? And in a prime location in the most leisure orientated city on the planet? The explanations are myriad, but likely to be additional factors on top of the staggering \$150,000 rent PER MONTH. Jeez, talk about a "do or die!" rent. A common criticism was the hefty ticket price, but the sheer numbers of actors involved made that simply unavoidable. In any event the killing blow came when the company Haunted Desert LLC failed to make a final batch of payments to Creative Uprising (the branding specialists that designed the attraction's corporate logo and identity). This triggered the need for bankruptcy protection. It's a real shame. Eli Roth tried something brave here with his ten million dollar brainchild, and raised the bar for any future attraction of this type. This was no pop up event. This was as close to being inside a real horror movie as you could get (without actually being kidnapped and tortured by a bunch of nutters). As sad as this is, it would be a real nightmare if this failure were to dissuade anyone from ever attempting something this cool ever again.

EPILOGUE

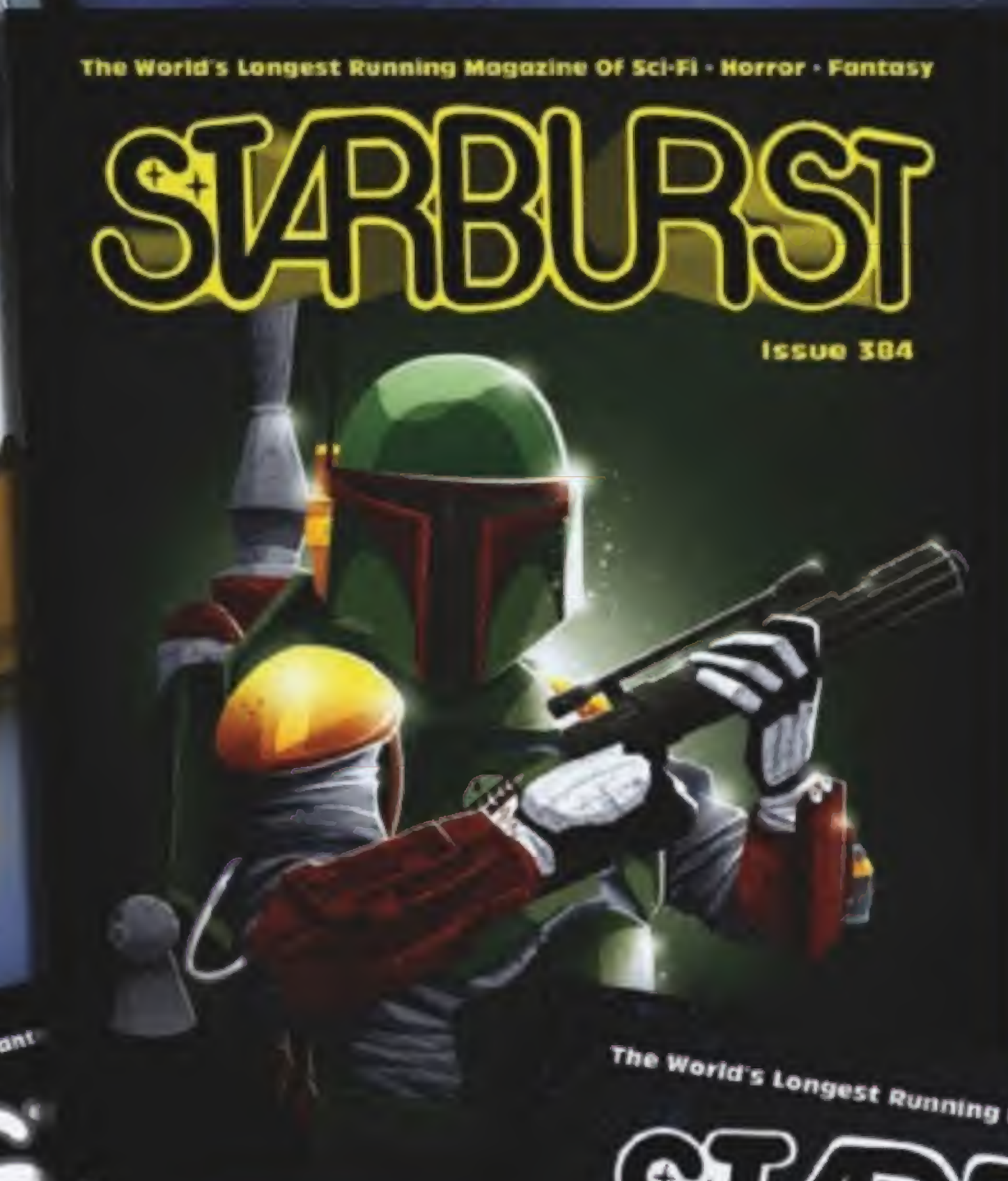
Jordan Royce returned home to resume his search for an interactive horror experience that is not run by an insolvent farmer, and does not give him rabies.

Zombaby returned home but missed his new friends at the **Goretorium**. Happily he was joined a week later by an adopted older sister – Nocturna (The Vambaby). Zombaby finds it funny that he cannot see his sister in the mirror, and that she floats a lot.

Starburst Shauna actually managed to find an art installation on the outskirts of a genuine ghost town in the middle of the desert, and is now the toast of all her hipster mates. At the time of writing she has been sober for a full 48 hours, and is facing life one day at a time... ✦

Jordan Royce can be contacted at Jordan.royce@starburstmagazine.com and co-hosts the weekly Starburst Radio Show with Assistant Editor Kris Heys. Available from iTunes as a Podcast.

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